Shantae: A New Genie

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A retelling of the Shantae video game series with my own touch. To those unfamiliar, you don't need to be familiar with the games to read this story.

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Chapter 1

Chapter 1

Shantae's eyes slowly fluttered open as her alarm clock rang. She placed her fingertips over her lips, letting a yawn pop out of her mouth. She leaped out of the hammock she called a bed and stretched her arms. She carefully placed her red blanket back onto the hammock and smiled. Through the cross that held up her window, she observed a peaceful area below her: Scuttle Town. She had known the town her entire life and yet it was still refreshing to peek out the window. The blistering heat would have been unbearable for anyone who did not live in the town.

The lighthouse she lived in was only connected to the town thanks to the wooden bridge linking the two together. *Maybe I can get a house closer by someday,* Shantae thought to herself. *It would make going to town easier*. Her smile widened as a certain thought burst into her mind. *On the bright side, I can finally apply,* she thought excitedly. Her birthday had recently passed, granting her the chance to apply for the town's most sacred position: the guardian. Scuttle Town's mysterious rank had been vacant for years, leaving Shantae curious as to what the position entailed.

I wonder what it pays, she pondered as she tapped her fingers against the window sill. *Hopefully enough to buy those cinnamon rolls more often.* She licked her lips; she could almost taste the soft, sweet dough of the cinnamon roll in her mouth. The store she went to had the best sweets she could ever buy. The only downside was that her allowance often left her in short supply of cinnamon rolls.

Maybe someday. Shantae let out a sigh as she rested her arms on the window sill. *More than anything, I hope this job can pay the bills,* she thought. While she did not pay any of the bills, she was more than aware her uncle was always busy trying to make ends meet. He was usually stuck in his lab, trying to find what he could sell to keep a roof over their heads every month. From what she had gathered from rumors in town, being the guardian was the highest

paying job a citizen could get. *Uncle Mimic, I promise, I'm going to make things easier for you.*

From a great distance, she saw the mayor walking through the town while waving to the town's citizens. He was a man of short stature and heavy mass. He wore a bright blue vest and a turban with a blue gem as a centerpiece as well as a red feather above the gem. Snow white hair peeked from below his turban. Finally, he wore baggy white pants and a red obi. His lack of a shirt underneath his vest did not make the town's unbearable heat any better. He panted while he waved to local citizens with his left hand and ate a half-melted chocolate bar with his right. *Eww,* Shantae shivered. *Well, might as well get the day started.*

She went over to her hammock to pick up her daily outfit. She changed into her new attire almost immediately: a pair of red sheer harem pants and matching bra, as well as gold jewelry. She had blue eyes and long purple hair that reached past her waist. She tied it back in a ponytail with a golden cuff as she placed a golden tiara onto her forehead. The centerpiece of the tiara was a blue gem that belonged to her mother.

Making you proud everyday, Shantae thought with an awkward smile before it reverted into a grimace. *Wherever you are.* She let out a sigh, rubbing her shoulders. The more she thought about it, the more she realized how little she knew about either of her parents. She could not remember either of them and she had no clue where either had ended up.

At least I still got Uncle Mimic around, she thought, bringing a smile back to her face. *Too bad he's always busy in his workshop.* Her uncle was a relic hunter, always on the search to uncover new artifacts or replicate old ones with his scientific experiments. He used to have a machine that actually replicated objects, but it and its blueprints were stolen long ago.

Maybe Uncle Mimic won't be busy for once. She walked to the center of the room; a rope that hung from the ceiling that reached down a hole. She slid down the rope, gliding down to the first floor. She walked past a brick oven on her left, recalling found memories of her uncle teaching her how to cook a pizza. *Too bad I burnt it,* she

grimaced. Her next encounter was a shelf case lined with dozens of books. Several of them were books Mimic had used for education, while many more were merely comic books. *I should probably finish reading those later,* she thought regarding her comics.

Taking her first steps outside, she noticed her reflection in the ocean underneath the bridge. She bent down, letting her fingertips drift against the water. *The current's moving a bit faster today,* Shantae observed, pulling her hand up. *I hope that doesn't bother the fishermen.* Walking down the bridge, she heard creaks with every step. With her next step, her right foot could not find the ground. "EEP!" she shrieked, her leg falling through the bridge. She looked down, seeing that splintered pieces of wood floated in the ocean. She yanked her foot up, tearing a small portion of her pants off her ankle. She groaned, picking up the ripped cloth and placing it in her pocket. She continued walking into town, passing by several merchant shops.

A small girl ran up to her, pulling on her leg. "Hi, Shantae!" she greeted. The girl wore ratty pink clothes and kept her hair in pigtails.

"Hi there, Mia!" Shantae replied, bending down to speak to her. "How have things been?"

"They're okay," Mia replied. "Are you ever going to do that Genie magic my mom told me about?"

"What do you mean?" Shantae questioned.

"My mom reads me stories every night about the Genies!" Mia exclaimed. "They can do magic like grant wishes for people. Can you do that?"

Shantae chuckled nervously. "Sure..." she murmured. "Just... not right now."

"Oh," Mia pouted, her head drooping.

"Maybe another time, Mia," Shantae suggested, feigning a smile.

"Why don't you use your magic?" Mia asked. "The Genies in my book do it all the time. You're a Genie too, right?"

“Yeah, I am,” Shantae said hesitantly.

“Then why not use it?” Mia asked. “You’d be way more awesome if you used your magic to help people.”

“I...” Shantae murmured. “I... can try using it later,” she murmured, looking away from Mia.

“Yay!” Mia exclaimed, bouncing up and down.

“Bye Mia,” Shantae said, walking away. *Next stop, Uncle Mimic’s.* She bumped into a gluttonous figure, nearly falling over with him.

“Sorry, Mayor!” she quickly apologized, holding her hand out.

“Don't scare me like that,” he complained, heaving while taking her hand. “What do you want?”

“Sorry!” she quickly apologized. “I'm just really excited today since you know, I want to become Scuttle Town’s guardian!”

“Uh, Shantae, I hate to tell you this, but you have to be eighteen to become the Town Guardian...”

“I know,” she replied. “I turned eighteen a few days ago.”

“Huh,” the mayor murmured. “I thought you were like sixteen or something. Well, then you’re hired.”

“Really?” Shantae asked, astonished. “Just like that?”

“Yeah, sure. You are a Genie, right?” the mayor asked, looking away to focus on his chocolate bar.

“Yeah, but I thought there’d be a test,” Shantae murmured, making her newfound boss groan.

The mayor shook his head. “Nah. Being a Genie is good enough,” he replied. “And we haven’t had a guardian in years. Would make a nice change for once.”

“Mayor, I feel like you’re picking me because of what I am rather

than *who* I am," Shantae pointed out.

The mayor facepalmed himself, letting his fingers stretch his cheeks out in exhaustion. "Do you want the job or not?"

"Yes, but..."

"Then take it," the mayor griped.

"Can't I have a test or something first?" Shantae pleaded, clasping her hands together.

"You can't make this easy, can you?" the mayor replied, taking another bite of his chocolate bar. "If you really want a job, just stop whoever attacks our town next."

"You got it!" Shantae exclaimed, her fist in the palm of her other hand. "Wait... stop as in how? Like a jaywalker? Or a thief?"

"You know how sometimes pirates sneak into this town and steal stuff?" the mayor asked.

"Kind of," Shantae admitted. "My uncle tells me to watch out for them."

"Just stop them the next time you see one," the mayor ordered.

"How will I know if they're a pirate?" Shantae questioned.

"I don't know," the mayor replied. "Just stop them and you got the job."

"Sir, you're not giving me much to go on," Shantae pointed out.

"You want to be the guardian, right? Guardians know how to solve their town's problems."

You've got to be kidding me. How is this guy the mayor? Shantae wondered irately.

"Anything else you need?" the mayor asked, beginning to turn away.

"Could you fix the bridge?" Shantae asked quickly. "It fell apart when

I was walking across it."

The mayor sighed, turning around. "Can't you fix that with your magic?"

"Uh... my magic doesn't work like that," Shantae insisted. "My magic is more for... battles."

"Then I guess we can send somebody out to fix it," the mayor replied. "Let me know when you stop that pirate. I'm going to bed."

"It's only two in the afternoon," Shantae pointed out, blinking in disbelief.

The mayor dismissed her concerns, waving her off. "It's nighttime somewhere, Shantae."

"Wait, what does the job pay?" Shantae asked, noticing he was walking away.

"We'll talk about that *after* you get the job," the mayor stated, leaving her to her thoughts.

Shantae sighed. "Bye, Mayor..." She slowly began walking, focusing on finding her uncle once more. She entered a street that had merchant shops left and right. She passed by shops that sold potions, scimitars, and many other items. She noticed one wooden stand with a sign hanging above it that read, "Abu's Swords." She picked up a scimitar off its rack and began swishing it back and forth in the forth. "He he," she snickered, mimicking the act of a pirate.

"Like what you see?" the man behind his wooden stand asked. Much like the mayor, he wore a turban and a blue vest, but was much skinnier and wore green pants.

Shantae giggled. "Yep!" she stated, continuing to swing the sword around.

"The normal selling price is three hundred gems," Abu explained.

"Seems a bit pricey," Shantae murmured, quickly putting the sword on the rack.

“But... there’s a sale going on for magic users,” the man stated. “Twenty-five gems if you can show me an impressive magic trick.”

“I could show you my hair whip technique,” Shantae suggested.

“Eh, everybody's seen that by now. It’s not that impressive,” Abu stated with a shrug. “Try something else.”

“I can probably do that,” Shantae stated, feigning a grin. As much as that statement irked her, she did not want to miss out on a cheap sword. She held out her hands, covering one over the other.

“What are you doing?” Abu asked.

“Magic!” Shantae exclaimed. Moving her fingers around, she presented an illusion with her hand. “Look! I pulled my thumb off!”

Abu stared at her hand then glanced at her nervous expression. “Aren’t you supposed to be a Genie? I wasn’t expecting a third rate magician.”

Shantae groaned, pulling her hands back. “I save the real magic for my battles,” she claimed.

“I’m not asking you to break the world in two,” Abu pointed out. “I just wanted to see something a *Genie* can do. It’s not like we see too many of you around anymore.”

Shantae’s annoyed expression morphed into a scowl. “You don’t have to remind me,” she grumbled, stomping away.

“So, is that a no on the real magic?” Abu asked.

Shantae sat with her legs crossed, watching her reflection wash in the water’s current. She sat the edge of the town’s docks, letting her hand drift into the water. *Mom. How did you do it?* she wondered. Something in the corner of Shantae’s eye caught her attention. A black sphere was hurtling itself at an unbelievable speed in her direction. She ducked as the sphere crashed through the concrete, shards of pavement spraying across the floor. “What was that?”

Shantae asked, seeing a small crater near her hammock. In the crater rested a smoldering cannonball.

“A cannonball?” Shantae wondered. She noticed the area around her became enclosed by a small army. This army consisted of small, pitch-black, humanoid creatures, all of whom identical in appearance. Their hands had four clawed fingers and their feet had three clawed toes. They all wore the same outfit: a red bandana and matching pants. Spikes that formed part of their vertebrae protruded from their backs. Their gleaming yellow eyes looked up to her, ready to pounce.

“Are you guys the pirates?” Shantae asked, baffled by how numerous these creatures were. The creatures each took a step forward, limiting Shantae's breathing space. Despite visually lacking mouths, the creatures made clacking sounds that Shantae could not understand. “I don't speak... that...” Shantae murmured, looking behind her shoulder to see one creature ready to pounce upon her. The creature dug its feet into the ground and leaped forward. Shantae spun around and pulled her head back. With a single whip, her ponytail smacked the creature into its teammates, knocking them down like dominos.

I don't remember any pirates outright attacking the town before, Shantae thought before more of the creatures lunged at her. She lifted her head back once more, letting her ponytail crash into her opponents. Performing a spin, she knocked down every creature in sight. She ceased her spinning, holding onto her stomach. Her vision had blurred while her insides continued to spin. *That was a bad idea...*

For several years now, she had a method of attack that only she knew. When her hair was tied in a ponytail, she could attack opponents like a whip. Sometimes she would try to create variations of her attack as she did now, albeit to varying success. She had no idea what side of her parentage she inherited this skill from. She knew, from what her uncle had told her, that her father was human and her mother was a Genie. She had very little knowledge about the Genie race. All she knew was that they supposedly lived in another dimension and protected the realm she lived in from unknown invaders. At least, that was what her uncle told her

growing up. *I wonder if she's there too,* Shantae thought before she looked to her left. Her eyes widened in surprise. A large, brown pirate ship wassailing across the water while the creatures were tying up the town's citizens with rope. *I should go take care of that*, Shantae noticed, rushing off to knock out the closest threats she could find.

A woman, much older than Shantae was, stood in front of Mimic. This woman wore a purple and red pirate hat that had a skull as a centerpiece. In her left hand was a scimitar and in her right was a pistol. Strands of purple hair peaked underneath her pirate hat as she wore purple and red wrist cuffs. She also had a purple necklace with a gold pendant around her neck, a matching bikini top that resembled like the upper half of a skull, and deep purple pants lined with a white rim that looked like a jaw bone, and finally purple boots. Her scimitar dragged against the ground, a screeching sound following in its path. Behind her stood two of her minions.

The older man wore a green trench coat, a black shirt, jeans, a black belt with a yellow buckle, and black-rimmed goggles with orange lenses over his eyes. "Who are you?" the man said with a scowl.

The woman smirked, her scimitar lifting up into the air. Her sword was only inches away from his beard. "Risky Boots. Don't you remember me? Surely, you remember the Pirate Master?" she asked, making his blood run cold. "I need some help getting him out of my head."

"You're not getting anything from me," Mimic growled. "That man is too dangerous to be let out. I'm sorry, but I can't help you."

"You might reconsider should I provide some... *motivation*," Risky suggested, edging her blade closer.

"I'm not afraid of you," Mimic retorted, moving closer to the blade.

"I can see that," Risky agreed with a yawn. "But there's got to be something you are afraid of."

“Nice try,” Mimic taunted. “He’s not getting into my mind.”

Risky scoffed. “I don’t need his help for this.” Her scimitar’s tip barely touched Mimic's beard now. “If I killed you, would anybody care? Perhaps you have some family who’d miss you. Do you really want them to lose you?”

“There is *nothing* you can do to convince me.”

“Hmph,” Risky scoffed. “How selfish.” She slammed her boot into his chest, sending him crashing into a wooden desk. As she approached the barely conscious Mimic, she saw something below his feet. He had created a hole from his fall, revealing a black safe hiding below. *Bingo*, she thought, grinning. She held out her pistol, shooting a fiery bullet made of red energy at the safe. The bullet bounced off the safe, instead flying away to blow up the wall to her right. *Of course I can't just shoot it.* She snapped her fingers. “Men, get this back to the ship,” she commanded. She walked over to Mimic. “This could have been a lot less painful, you know,” she snarked. Her minions, the Tinkerbats, tried dragging the safe, but none of them could make it budge. “Let me show you how it’s done,” Risky stated, picking up the safe. Although it was heavily, she managed to carry it outside.

That old man seems to be safeguarded by magic, a voice inside her head spoke. *Anything or anyone within ten feet of him seems to be immune to my presence.*

That would explain why you actually shut up for once, Risky snarked.

That empty head of yours must have felt pretty lonely then, the voice joked.

Never.

Shantae groaned, having trouble undoing the rope that wrapped around a senior citizen’s arms. “Can’t you just use your magic to put out these fires?” the old woman complained, sitting impatiently.

“My powers don’t work like that,” she said, her eyes racing to find a solution. *Why is this so hard?*

She groaned, giving up. *I’m wasting time. I need to find the source of this problem.*

“Then how *do* they work?” the citizen whined before noticing Shantae walking past her. “And you’re just going to leave me here? You’re no more useful than any of us.”

Shantae gritted her teeth as she spun a quarter circle. She bent down to get right in the senior citizen’s face. “Look, I don't need to take this from... who's that?” she interrupted herself, seeing in the back of her eye a purple-skinned figure standing at the end of the dock. A safe stood next to her.

“I don’t know. Maybe your magic can tell us,” the citizen snarked, making Shantae's eye twitch. The citizen took a step back, laughing nervously. “Hey, I was just kidding. Please don’t hurt me,” she pleaded. Shantae took a deep breath, prompting the citizen to run out of the way of danger.

Shantae groaned. *Maybe I should tell them I’m just a half-Genie,* she thought. When she was younger, although she knew of her parentage, she would always insist on being called a Genie, believing it sounded cooler and would get her more friends. *Telling them I was a Genie only gave them expectations. And I’m not any different from them besides from my hair. Maybe if I did they’d get off my case. But the mayor probably wouldn’t hire me then...* She shook her head. *I need to focus.* By the time she regained her composure, the pirate was already standing in front of her. “Did you send those guys I beat earlier?” Shantae demanded.

The woman chuckled upon seeing Shantae. “I was wondering what was taking them so long. *You’re* the one giving my men so much trouble?” she asked, covering her giggling lips. “A *kid* is giving my men *this* much trouble?”

“Hey!” Shantae snapped. “I turned eighteen a few days ago!”

“And you think that makes you strong enough to beat me?” the

woman asked with a smug grin. She took a closer look.

“I beat your men pretty easily,” Shantae countered, staring at the pistol. *I can probably knock away her sword pretty easily, but I don’t know what that gun’s packing.* A swarm of the creatures appeared behind the pirate, surprising Shantae. *Where did they come from?* she wondered. “I’ve been meaning to ask,” Shantae said quickly. “What do you call your men? They’ve got to have names.” She gulped, hoping the woman would be thrown off her guard by this.

The woman blinked, baffled by the question. “I don’t know.”

One of the Tinkerbats spoke in his language, irritating the woman. “No one cares!” the woman snapped.

“You can understand them?” Shantae asked, inching closer.

“Of course I can!” the woman shouted.

“Why are you relying on them anyway?” Shantae asked. “Why don’t you just shoot me?”

The woman sighed. “You’ve got a family?” she asked.

What are you doing? the voice asked. *That is a daughter of a Genie. And the daughter of the most wretched one of all. We can’t afford to let her live.*

She probably doesn’t know her mother’s history, Risky replied. *Let me handle this.*

Risky... the voice growled, doing his best to keep his temper under control. He was on the verge of an outburst with just the sight of Shantae revolting him. To know that girl had the blood of that control freak made him erratic. *There’s no saving her.*

We have what we need. We can get her on our side, Risky argued.

You have one chance, the voice warned.

Shantae blinked, lowering her guard briefly. “What?”

“Do you have a family?” Risky asked.

Shantae studied Risky’s expression, finding a sad look in her eyes. It was almost as if the pirate did not want to hurt her. “Yeah... my uncle,” Shantae murmured. “Mimic.” Risky flinched slightly, something that Shantae noticed. “Do you... know him?”

Risky nodded. “I do. You love him?”

Shantae carefully considered her words. Mimic had always tried to be there for her, even when he was busy with his inventions. There was no one else in her life she could actually call family. “He’s all I got,” she finally spoke.

“Then I don’t see any reason to kill you,” Risky said. “Stay out of my way. I’ll pretend I never saw you.”

“Wait, you attacked my town. You think I’ll just look the other way?” Shantae said, balling her fists.

“If you do, I will never come back,” Risky offered.

“Why are you even here? And why did you attack my town?”

“I want to find peace of mind,” Risky explained. “And the attack was only to ward off authorities. They don’t take kindly to anyone who looks like a pirate.”

“What kind of peace of mind are you after?” Shantae questioned.

“Hard to explain,” Risky stated. “Imagine a spirit who won’t ever leave you alone. What I have now is the key to getting rid of it. Your uncle gave me said key.”

Shantae looked her in the eyes. Nothing in her expression seemed untruthful. Yet, she still had a seed of doubt plaguing her thoughts. *What if she’s telling the truth?* she wondered. She took a deep breath. “Ok,” she finally spoke. “Get out of here before any cops show up.”

“You’re really going to trust me?” Risky asked. “Just like that?”

“You could have just shot me in the head whenever you wanted,” Shantae pointed out. “You didn’t for a reason.”

Risky nodded before turning around. “Thank you,” she said. “By the way, I believe you should have a chat with your uncle. From our talks, I don’t believe he cares about you as much as you do for him.”

“What are you talking about?” Shantae asked.

“It’s hard to explain,” Risky stated. “Try talking to him about it. See how much he *really* cares about you.”

She picked up the safe and began walking away. “Men, let’s go.”

You mean my *men,* a voice spoke to her, making her growl.

How much longer until I'm rid of you, old man? she bitterly asked the voice.

The voice chuckled, making her blood boil. *You know you can’t get rid of me.*

Shantae sat on the docks, letting her legs float above the water. At least ten minutes had past and the pirate ship was gone. *Is this what Mom would have done?* she wondered, holding onto her shoulders. *Or maybe Dad would have done this too?*

“Shantae!” a concerned voice shouted from a few feet away.

“Uncle Mimic?” Shantae asked, seeing an older man now standing next to her. Mimic, although mostly bald, still retained some traces of white hair on his head. A beard that reached down to his waist occupied most of his face. He wore a green trench coat, a black shirt, jeans, a black belt with a yellow buckle, and black-rimmed goggles with orange lenses over his eyes.

“What happened to you?” Mimic asked. “Did you stop that pirate?”

Shantae stood up. “We came to an agreement. She’s not coming back.”

Mimic grabbed onto his hair, nearly ripping it out. “You what?” he screamed. “Shantae, she tricked you! You could’ve died!”

“What are you talking about?” Shantae asked. “She was just trying to get a voice out of her head. If she wanted me dead, she would have just shot me.”

“The voice in her head is the single worst threat the Genies ever faced,” Mimic warned, making Shantae’s eyes widen in fear. “We can’t let that voice be freed. He will be the death of us. It’s a miracle Risky was able to hold him back.”

“How bad is he?” Shantae winced.

Mimic sighed. “I’d rather not go into detail, but I learned of what he did as it was happening,” he explained. “He is not going to stop until he’s taken all of the Genies’ powers.”

“Wait, you said Risky was able to hold him back,” Shantae pointed out. “What did she do?”

“He was her boss back in the day. If I had to guess, she managed to convince him not to infect your mind,” Mimic stated. “He can get into your brain and make you see things. Things you can *never* forget.”

Shantae shuddered. “Hey, Risky had a safe with her. Was there something dangerous inside it?”

“By itself, yes,” Mimic answered. “But when combined with something else, it becomes something worse. If Risky's boss finds what he’s looking for... I don’t want to think about it.”

Shantae’s eyes widened as she began smacking herself on the head. “I’m so stupid!” she yelled at herself. “I let her get away.”

“Don’t beat yourself up yet,” Mimic advised, which made his niece stop her assault on her cranium. “There’s still a chance to stop her.”

“Really?” Shantae asked.

Mimic nodded as he bent down to place a comforting hand on Shantae’s shoulder. “Yes. But it’s going to be more dangerous than

dealing with a few Tinkerbats. You're going to want to listen to what I have to say."

Shantae gave a quick nod. "You got it, Uncle!" she exclaimed.

"Just like your mother," Mimic said with a smile, which made his niece grin. "Now then, let's start from the beginning..."

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Risky Boots looked over the same notes she had found from the safe. It had taken a bit of time, but she had been able to crack the lock. She was standing behind a Tinkerbat, who was steering the ship's wheel. They had not yet drifted that far away from Scuttle Town. All of the notes were nonsense as far as she could tell, just stuff about what he was going to sell to pay his bills. *There is a pattern, you know,* the voice pointed out.

If there was a pattern, why didn't you tell me sooner? Risky demanded.

I was hoping you'd be smart enough to recognize it by now, the voice said in a droll tone. *Look at the first letter of each paragraph from those pages.*

Water, Risky read, recognizing the pattern at last. She looked at the second paper. *Oasis. What is he plotting?*

More than we know, it seems, the voice observed. *Perhaps this was a last resort for a loved one to find should he have died.*

Why would he be so dumb to let me find this? Risky wondered.

He didn't expect you to understand it, the voice assumed. *He probably would have given it to somebody who could actually figure it out.*

Are you implying a kid could have figured this out while I couldn't?

Well, you *didn't, did you?* the voiced laughed, making Risky grit her teeth.

Sorry I never went to detective school.

If you did, we wouldn't be having this conversation.

And you wouldn't have a chance at getting out, now would you?

Too late for what ifs, I'm afraid, the voice snarked. *If the first note mentions water, I can only assume he means Water Town.*

There's a town called Water *Town?* Risky asked incredulously.

Yes, the voice replied. *You never spent much time in the Land of Sequin, did you?*

Not particularly. What's next? Oasis Town? Zombie Town?

Oasis Town is a real location, the voice replied. *I do not know of anything regarding zombies, however. If my sense of direction is still correct, I do believe we are the closest to Water Town.*

What about the zombie?

A matter for another time.

Risky sighed, rubbing her temples. “Take us to Water Town,” she told the Tinkerbat in front of her. The Tinkerbat looked back at her, asking a question in his native language. “I don’t know where it is!”

Mimic took a deep breath as Shantae anticipated his words. “Risky is after four items,” he stated, holding up the same number of fingers on his left hand. “They’re called the Elemental Stones.”

Shantae blinked in confusion. She had never heard of such items and yet from his tone, she could tell that her uncle was more than familiar with them. “What do they do?” she asked.

“Each one has a different purpose,” Mimic stated. “The Dribble Stone gives you control of the water around you.”

“Oh, like that cartoon I watched as a kid!” Shantae said with a smile.

“Something like that,” Mimic admitted, pleasantly recalling watching

the show with his niece when she was small. “Next is the Sizzle Stone. That stone lets you produce fire.”

Shantae’s grin widened as she imagined what she could create with fire. *I could be my own microwave,* she thought excitedly. “So that could give me fire powers?”

“Yes, but you can’t obtain the power,” Mimic stated, causing Shantae to pout. “I’ll explain in due time. Now, where was I?” he wondered aloud, scratching his beard. “Oh yes. Next is the Golem Stone. It allows you to manipulate the Earth itself, mainly summoning rocks and the sort.”

“The next one lets you control air, right?” Shantae asked with a smirk, still reminiscing about her favorite cartoon.

“No,” Mimic replied, making Shantae frown. “The Twinkle Stone lets you control ice.”

Shantae raised an eyebrow. “Wouldn’t controlling water do the same thing?”

Mimic chuckled. “You’d think so, but no. The Dribble Stone lets you control water, not its temperature.”

“So you can’t summon water from the air?”

“No, you’d need a source of water available.”

“Oh, come on,” Shantae complained.

“The Twinkle Stone lets you summon ice whenever you like, however,” Mimic continued. “But you can’t change it into water either, I’m afraid.”

“How do you know about all this stuff?” Shantae asked.

“That is a long story, but the short answer is: your mother,” Mimic replied, making Shantae’s pointy ears perk up.

“Did she make them?” Shantae asked curiously.

“Yes,” Mimic stated. “The stones also act as a seal for this world. She also is the one who hid them.”

Shantae’s head tilted in confusion. “What do you mean, Uncle?”

“You know how the worst you’ve ever dealt with were those pirates?” Mimic asked.

Shantae nodded. Throughout her life, she had dealt with thieves and other small criminals in town, but the Tinkerbats and Risky were far more difficult to tangle with. “Are the stones keeping Risky’s boss from escaping?” she guessed.

“Yes,” Mimic confirmed with a grave look on his face. “Think of them as parts of a whole key. With each part she has, he breaches this world more and more. With all four, he’ll be able to live in this world fully.”

“What do I have to do, Uncle?” Shantae asked, clenching her fists together.

“Each stone is guarded in a different place,” Mimic continued. “The stones by themselves are useless beyond acting as the seal. Breaking them into pieces is impossible, so they the seal can’t be undone that way,” he stated, making Shantae smile. “But, if all of their powers are drained, then the seal will be removed.”

“Were there any others working with Risky’s boss?” Shantae asked. She could remember some of the tales her uncle had told her about over the past couple of years. As she was getting older, Mimic had decided to share bits and pieces about her Genie ancestry. While she did not have the full picture, she was getting a better idea about her history with each passing day. “You told me once the Genies fought off people trying to attack Earth and other realms.”

“I sure hope not,” Mimic sighed. “Risky has the only tool that can drain the powers of the stones.”

“What is it?” Shantae asked.

“A power absorber in the shape of a magic lamp,” Mimic explained. “It was in the safe she stole.”

“What, like a genie lamp?” Shantae guessed with a slight chuckle.

“The tool may look innocent, but its capabilities are not,” Mimic replied sternly, making Shantae cease her laughter. “If she gets close enough to the stones with that lamp, she can break the seal.”

Shantae gulped at the thought of her magic being stolen. She was only barely familiar with her abilities as it was and she did not want them to be stolen before she could learn more about them. As far as she knew, Risky was still keeping the voice under her heel, but for how much longer was anybody's guess. The only magic she was capable of was her hair whip and that she was still attempting to master. “What happens if her boss gains control of Risky? Will he try to take my magic, Uncle?” she asked worriedly.

“Risky's boss has the ability to steal powers just by grabbing you. That is, if all four stones are absorbed. The lamp is for the stones. And... assuming you have any magic, most likely.”

“What do you mean?”

Mimic sighed as he took a step back. “To be honest, I don’t know if you even have any magic,” Mimic said somberly. “Remember those health exams I do for you?”

Shantae nodded. “Yeah? I had one last year.”

“They weren’t just health exams,” Mimic said somberly. “I should have said this sooner but... the exams also tested your body for any magic. I couldn’t find any.”

“Oh...”

“I’m sorry, Shantae, but you haven’t displayed any magic yet. Genies usually take at least seven years to develop their magic. I don't know how it would apply to half-Genies, if at all. And you’re the only one I know of.”

“What about my hair?” Shantae asked, pointing to her ponytail. “That’s gotta be magic, right?”

“As strange as it may seem, I don’t think so,” Mimic stated. “That

probably just came from your father. He had a mustache like your hair he could use to attack people. And he didn't have an ounce of magic in him from what I could tell."

"Oh..." Shantae murmured. "But why did you even have that lamp? Why couldn't you throw it away or destroy it?"

"Your mother thought it was a fancy toy until one day she rubbed it and lost her powers for a day. She realized the danger of the lamp and sealed it in that safe. And the lamp can't be destroyed," Mimic sighed. "It was created a long time ago with an unbreakable seal. There is no way to destroy the lamp. And it cannot be held by someone without a magical aura, so I cannot move it." He placed a hand on Shantae's shoulder. "If you do somehow have magic at this point, it is invaluable. Every Genie can learn some form of magic, either from age or learning from other Genies."

"But all the Genies are back in their realm," Shantae pointed out. "How am I supposed to learn what to do if they're all gone?"

"That reminds me of something your mother once told me," Mimic recalled with a small smile as he rubbed his beard. "'You can't get any better without doing it yourself.'"

"Did she have any teachers?" Shantae questioned.

"A few yes, but she preferred to come up with her own techniques," Mimic stated. "The stones are made from her powers."

Shantae's eyes widened excitedly. "You mean I could get Mom's powers?!" she exclaimed.

"Like I said before, no," Mimic insisted. "They need to be there for the seal to remain intact. Risky needs to be stopped."

Shantae blinked as she took in all this information and replayed her Uncle's words in her head. "How do you know all of this?" she asked. "And how do you know her name?"

"I used to be friends with Risky's boss," Mimic explained, making Shantae blink in surprise. "I'm afraid I can't explain anymore about that right now. We need to focus."

“What are we going to do about Risky?” Shantae asked. “Is there any way to get that voice out of her head safely?”

Mimic sighed. “For now, I have no idea.”

Shantae looked down in sorrow, imagining what horrors it was like to live with such a monster in her head. *Risky, I’m going to help you. I promise.* She pulled her head back up and looked into Mimic’s eyes. “Hey Uncle, how are we going to stay in touch in case I need your help?” Shantae asked.

Mimic sighed. “Yes, but I’m afraid I won’t be much help. You can probably get help from some of your old friends at least.”

“What are you talking about?” Shantae asked.

“The first stone is in Dribble Fountain, it’s near Water Town and to the east of here,” Mimic stated, making Shantae’s ears perk up once more.

“That’s where Bolo lives,” she commented, remembering that she would sometimes visit her childhood friend in his hometown. “Does he know about the stone?”

“Yes,” Mimic stated. “Bolo’s the best Water Town’s got and he knows how to get the stone.”

“That’s not really setting a high bar, Uncle,” Shantae said with a wince. She knew that although her friend was a year older than her and talented in terms of combat skills, he lacked expertise in every other category, especially social cues and intelligence. She knew that Bolo had a bad habit of falling in love with any beautiful woman that crossed his eye, albeit without any success with getting a date. She also knew that he had a tendency to not think things through.

“He’s the best fighter in that town,” Mimic pointed out. “Not to mention he's the Town Guardian there. He may not be the brightest, but he can still help.”

“Speaking of brightness, why didn’t Mom just toss these things into the ocean?” Shantae asked. “We wouldn’t have to deal with this if she did that.”

“Your mother... was not that smart,” Mimic grimaced. “And I did not realize this until later.”

“Oh...” Shantae murmured.

Mimic nodded with a mutual disappointment. “She kept a seal on the safe on it so it couldn’t be opened or moved without someone who had a magical aura. Such as Risky...”

“Risky has magic?”

“To an extent. To what extent I do not know. But I think her master’s magic might surround her with such an aura, so that might be why.”

“How did she find the safe so easily?”

“Your mother thought it'd be a good idea to keep it under my lab.”

“Uncle... how dumb was my mom?” Shantae asked, astonished her mother had picked such an easily found spot.

“It varied from moment to moment,” he sighed. “She also gave me a magic compass to find them.” He pulled his left boot off and pulling out a broken compass. “Sadly, it seems to be broken. Must have been from my fall,” he murmured, reapplying his shoe.

“Just looks like a regular compass.”

“That might be the point,” Mimic admitted. “Your mother thought it would be unsuspecting if it looked normal. Sadly, the compass had a side effect of being sensed by others with a magical aura. Even if it still worked and you took it with you, Risky’s boss would be alerted to your presence in no time.”

“Wait, why didn’t Risky just take the compass?”

“Nobody around me can sense it,” Mimic explained. “It’s only a trick I learned recently. I can cancel out the magic presence in an area completely. Unfortunately, this trick of mine doesn’t react to the seal. I tried with the one inside the Dribble Fountain. No such luck. Not to mention, this trick only works for ten minutes once a day.”

“Does anybody else know about how to get the stones?”

“Besides Bolo, only two others know about the stones,” Mimic explained. “Your old friend Sky is one of them.”

Shantae smiled as the thought of her other friend, the bird trainer, popped into her brain. The bird lover was also a year older than her and Shantae knew that Sky was a good person to come to when looking for advice, except for when she was looking for a boyfriend. While Sky was more successful than Bolo by actually getting a date, the guy would usually leave by a week or two. *Guess she and Bolo have something in common,* Shantae observed.

“Finally, there is someone I met three weeks ago who does have a magical aura.”

“Really?” Shantae asked. Mimic nodded. A new thought entered Shantae’s brain. This particular thought vexed her. “Hey Uncle... how come Bolo and Sky knew about the stones before I did? They’re not even part Genie like I am. They can’t touch the stone either. And yet they know how to find them.”

Mimic paused for a moment as he let out a sigh. “Shantae, there are a lot of things I had hoped you’d never have to learn about.”

Shantae crossed her arms as she raised an eyebrow. “But why them, Uncle? We’re *family,*” she stated, taking a step closer as Mimic edged himself back.

“I didn’t want to tell them,” Mimic admitted. “Only this third person was supposed to know. But Bolo visited me the day I was telling the information to her and he blathered what he had heard to Sky. So, I had to rope them in.”

Shantae facepalmed herself. *Dang it, Bolo,* she thought.

“I only told Bolo and Sky about one stone each so in case of interrogations, they wouldn't give away *all* of the locations. I'm scared to even tell you to be honest,” Mimic explained.

“What about this other person?”

“She’s a bit older than you are,” Mimic stated. “She has a kind of magic that keeps her from having her mind invaded by this monster. That’s why I wanted her help. She knows both of the last two locations. Bolo and Sky only know of the first two.”

“But why didn’t I know about any of this?” Shantae asked. “If there’s a threat to the town, people should know about it, including ones who can actually do something.”

“A bit hard to convince the mayor the apocalypse is coming,” Mimic stated. “He’d probably think we were pranking him. And this town has never seen danger like this before, so it’d be hard to know who would actually help, much less care. Bolo and Sky were much easier to convince.”

“But why didn’t you tell me?”

“I told them in the hope they would never use that knowledge. Risky’s master hasn’t been around in thirteen years. It’s a miracle he hasn’t been a problem until now. Bolo and Sky are older than you and more experienced. I thought they could handle the information better than you,” Mimic stated, remembering that he had told the information recently He remembered that he had made them promise to not tell Shantae that they knew unless he said they could. “I believed they could defeat Risky if the time came. They’re very capable fighters and the only ones who I thought could help me.”

“Wait, why didn’t you get this third person to hide them all somewhere it couldn’t be found?”

“By the time I had told her, she had agreed, but I never saw her again. I have no idea where she is now.”

“That’s just great,” Shantae grumbled. “But why didn’t you tell me about Risky? It’d be useful to know a pirate might come after you. And what am I supposed to do with the stones once I find them?”

“I'm still figuring that out. And I didn’t want to add any further stress to you. Risky hadn’t been seen in over ten years either. For all I knew, she could have been dead or had moved on with her life. And

if Risky knew that you were aware of the stones, she might've forced the information out of you and killed you. I... don't want to lose you."

"And you would let my friends take the fall instead?" Shantae asked angrily. *Risky may have been right. He does care about me, but not for the people* I *care about*, she thought. "If my magic's started kicking in this year, I have the best chance to protect those stones. Bolo and Sky will be killed if they don't give them up. And you don't even know where that third person is. What made you think this was a good idea?"

Mimic simply looked into her eyes, unable to produce a single answer. He tried to let out a sound, but stopped himself.

Shantae attempted to hide the bitterness in her voice, but it was still there. "I need to go," she stated, clenching her fists. She noticed that the town's fires had been put out for good now, making her slightly relieved. She planted her feet against the ground and took off in a sprint.

"Shantae..." Mimic murmured, watching his niece run off. "...I'm sorry."

As Shantae dashed, she ran through the town and was on her way. While she was running, something latched onto her. She looked down and saw a black tentacle tied around her ankle. *What the?*

Another tentacle appeared and wrapped itself around her other ankle, forcing herself back a couple of inches. Four more tentacles wrapped themselves around her stomach, wrists, and neck. She grabbed at the appendage tightening its grip around her neck. The air in her lungs was being cut off as she helplessly clawed at the tentacle. She looked around, hoping someone would see her in pain and attempt to help her. But instead, the entire world around her was enveloped in fires and darkness. The town she grew up in was now covered in lifeless skeletons as fires consumed the buildings. She saw a larger skeleton leaning against a stone wall on her right, holding out its left hand as if it was trying to call out for help. *Uncle?!* she wanted to scream, recognizing the frame of the skeleton.

Listen to me, the voice spoke into her ears, making Shantae's body

shiver as she continued to suffocate. The voice was not one she recognized, nor did it even sound human. The voice was raspy and sounded like it ached despite its frightening tone. The hoarseness in the voice did not deter its intimidation of the half-Genie, however. *You cannot run. You cannot hide from me.*

The appendages began dragging her into the black pit of darkness below her feet. She tried to scream for help, but the tentacles had sucked all of the air out of her lungs. Her face had turned blue as her hands went limp, letting the darkness drag her even further down. The voice continued its speech. *Once I am free, I will find you and when I do, you will suffer the same fate as every other Genie who has faced me.* Shantae's face barely hovered above the dark pit as the appendages were close to completely submerging her. *Your kind will be eradicated and there will one less group of control freaks desecrating a grateful universe.*

Shantae opened her eyes and found that her surroundings were back to normal. The town was no longer on fire, nor was it ridden with skeletons. Shantae rubbed her neck, baffled by how her wounds had disappeared as well. She wrapped her arms around her shaking body, hoping she could contain her fear. The voice still echoed in her head and she kept glancing down at her shoes. She felt like something was still pulling her down, but there was nothing there. *What... was that?*

Risky Boots found herself standing in front of a building in Water Town. In her hands was one of the notes she had stolen from Mimic. The town itself was guarded by marble columns that acted as a wall to outsiders. There were numerous fountains that had gallons of water gushing out by the minute. The town's structure reminded her of something akin to a coliseum. Despite the town's peaceful presence, the buildings were made with a glorious presence to them.

Risky shut her eyes and listened to the water flowing out of the fountains. She held her hand against her heart, letting the beat sync up with water's flow. She could not explain it, but the sound of the water was relaxing. *It's nice,* she thought. *Too nice.* She let out a

sigh, waiting for the voice to speak to her again. The voice had not talked to her in several hours. While she initially found its disappearance soothing, she felt like something was out of place for it to be gone for so long. No matter how long it was gone, however, she knew it would come back. It *always* did. *You've been quiet lately,* she finally said to the voice.

The voice chuckled, making her groan. She had hoped it would have finally left her by now. On the other hand, the voice's presence brought her a small sense of comfort. *Where did you go?* Risky demanded as she crossed her arms.

Interesting that you suddenly care about me when I leave for a bit, the voice said humorously.

Not the point, Risky said back to the voice. *Where were you?*

I was under the impression you didn't want my help. If that's true, why were you so worried about me leaving? Are you afraid you can't do this without me?

Just leave me alone, old man, Risky demanded as she gritted her teeth, attempting to let the sounds of the water calm her down.

We both know I can't do that, the voice replied, overtaking the peaceful sounds of the water. *Not when you still need me. And I still need you.*

I will never *need you.*

Keep telling yourself that.

Let me know if you get the reference to Shantae's favorite cartoon. :)

Chapter 3

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A young man attended his daily training. He had navy blue hair, a yellow headband, and wore a determined expression on his face. A white bandage was wrapped around his right upper arm. He wore a white tank top underneath a short blue vest and had dark blue shorts. He also wore tan gloves with metal rings around the cuffs. The gazebo he stood in was covered with numerous obstacles in front of his path.

He had installed various booby traps to test himself. Every other day, he would test himself to maintain his stamina. He planted his feet into the ground before dashing towards the danger. He carefully sidestepped various traps he had set up, including wires that could potentially trip him. He leaped over wooden fences implanted in the ground and rolled under a sign that hung in the air. As he ran, something caught his eye. An absolutely gorgeous woman many years older than himself was standing in front of his door. She resembled a pirate and carried herself with a confident demeanor. Bolo's heart excitedly bounced around inside his chest as he became oblivious to his surroundings. *She's... beautiful…* he thought as his jaw dropped in awe of her appearance. His face slammed into another sign he had put up, causing the sound to vibrate across the gazebo.

The woman blinked in surprise. *Are the people guarding these stones that dumb?* she wondered.

The young man appears to be in love, the voice observed with a snicker.

What's so funny? Risky demanded.

Given your... The voice paused a moment to hold back a chuckle. *...wonderful personality, I doubted you could attract any man.*

Whatever, Risky scoffed as she watched Bolo slowly pick himself

up. *He looks older than that runt.*

Try being nice to him, the voice suggested with a cackle. *He might give us what we want if you do.*

Probably, Risky replied. “You okay?” she asked Bolo, attempting to sound sincere.

Bolo rubbed his aching cranium. His vision was still blurry, but he could still see the woman in front of him. Her face was the most alluring aspect about, her understanding expression commanding a form of respect in his mind. “So what’s your name?” he asked eagerly, standing up.

“Rachel,” Risky answered, thinking on the fly. “I... wanted to see you,” she said with a caring voice, despite her struggling to pull off this performance. She had hidden her identity several times before, but this time felt the most humiliating. “I... wanted to ask you out.”

Bolo’s eyes bounced open in shock. “You want to... go out with me?” he asked, his jaw dropping in surprise.

Risky nodded. “Is something wrong?” she asked, noticing Bolo’s sudden nervousness.

“I’m just... surprised,” he admitted as he took a step closer. Her aura made him feel warm inside. “Most women just ignore me or they slap me,” Bolo said with an awkward chuckle. “You’re the only one who wants to go out with me...”

“Yeah,” Risky murmured, feeling a ping of guilt cloud her brain. “Maybe you can get me something before that point,” she suggested.

Bolo nodded eagerly. “Whatever you want,” he stated.

“Have you ever heard of this artifact called the Dribble Stone?” she asked, making his body go cold.

She... knows about that? Bolo asked worriedly. *Is she the one Mimic told me about? Risky Boots?* He took a deep breath and weighed his options. *What if she’s just an artifact collector? Or what if she’s*

lying? Bolo closed his eyes as he turned around, confusing Risky. *If she's lying, then I don't have a date, either. But I can't put everyone in danger...* He turned around and looked back at her. She was still beautiful, yet the once bright aura she radiated had dissipated. Now he could see more clearly.

"You're lying, aren't you?" he asked weakly, trying not to look her in the eye.

Risky blinked in surprise. *He figured it out?*

I'll take care of it, the voice assured her.

Bolo took notice of something off about her chest. It appeared as though she was wearing parts of an actual skeleton for a bra. He hadn't noticed it before, which he assumed was due to his infatuation. He took a step back in confusion. *Is that... that voice Mimic told me about?* he wondered.

It is, the voice spoke to him.

What do you want? Bolo asked worriedly, looking around constantly to find where the voice was coming from. Risky watched, baffled by how Bolo seemed to be panicking over nothing.

You and the rest of the traitors will find out soon enough, the voice replied.

Traitor? I don't even know you.

But I know what you've done, the voice retorted, sending a chill down his spine.

"Get out of my head!" Bolo snapped, grabbing onto his aching cranium.

Risky winced as she watched Bolo squirm.

The world around Bolo became dark and gruesome. Risky was no longer there. Instead, he was standing inside a cemetery. Unmarked gravestones surrounded him. *Where am I?* he wondered as he walked around. He stopped walking when he saw the only

gravestone marked with a name: his own. A rectangular hole was still there, meaning the casket had not been buried yet. *What's... going on?* he asked worriedly.

Young man, the voice spoke to him as black appendages lunged from the hole and wrapped around his arms and legs.

"Let me go!" Bolo screamed as the tentacles began dragging him closer to the grave. He planted his feet into the ground, but that barely slowed the appendages down. *You will give me the stone. You will crawl back into whatever hole you came from.* The appendages tightened their grip on his arms and legs, cutting off their blood circulation. *If you don't, I will break every bone in your body.*

With a single snap, the bones inside his left arm fractured. He attempted to scream, only for another tentacle to wrap itself around his mouth, silencing his cries for help. With another snap, his right arm's bones split in half as tears dripped from his eyes. The grave sucked him in, throwing him against the floor of the ground. *You will live just long enough to see the grave you will be buried in,* the voice continued. *Nobody will remember you. Certainly not your friends, which I doubt you even have.* Bolo looked up to see a casket floating above him. Without any warning, the casket dropped onto him, crushing him instantly. *All because you made the mistake of siding with those control freaks.*

Risky blinked as she watched Bolo crying, having curled into a ball. "I'll tell you where it is!" he shouted, his body shaking nonstop. *I don't want to die. I don't want to be forgotten about.*

You will be, the voice told him, making him sob even more.

What did you do to him? Risky asked the voice.

What was necessary. The strongest in this world are prepared to do what the weak cannot, the voice told Risky.

"It's in Dribble Fountain!" Bolo shouted. "You probably passed by it

already!”

I want the key you have, the voice instructed him.

“The key is a spikey fruit!” Bolo shouted. “You can buy them in town here. You just put it in the hole and turn it!”

There was a key? Risky asked.

How else do you open a locked door?

You knew? Why didn’t you tear it down with your magic?

My magic is unstable in this dimension without me truly being here, the voice stated. *There’s no telling what could happen if I tried to pull off such a destructive feat. The magic from when I was once there is still active, however.*

Fantastic, Risky murmured sarcastically. *So why didn’t you mention the key?*

I have all the time in the world, the voice replied nonchalantly. *And I like to enjoy the ride. I must say though, your acting needs work.*

Risky grumbled as she stomped her way out of the gazebo, leaving Bolo to his demons.

She walked past a stand, seeing an assortment of fruits. One of them was an apple with green spikes coming out of it. She snatched it before the vendor even realized it was missing.

“Bolo!” a voice shouted, snapping Bolo out of his trance. The world around him had returned to normal, his broken bones had healed, and the demonic Risky he saw when he handed over the key was no longer there. Instead, he saw a concerned Shantae looking down at him. “What happened?” he asked as she helped him up. “How long has it been?”

“I’ve been trying to wake you up for half an hour,” the worried voice stated.

Bolo's body twitched as she struggled to look Shantae in the eyes. "Shantae? What are you doing here?" he asked weakly.

"Mimic told me what's going on," Shantae said quickly. "Did you tell Risky where the stone is?" Bolo hung his head in shame as he looked away. "Bolo, please tell me you didn't give away the location!"

"I'm sorry..."

"Bolo, what did she say that made you give up the location?" Shantae demanded frantically.

"It wasn't her. It was... something else," he muttered, still hearing the echo of the bones shattering in his head. "He trapped me in a grave and said it was because I sided with control freaks..."

"That voice..." Shantae murmured, recognizing the words as a chill went up her spine. "I don't know what it is, but I know her boss put her up to this."

"So she might actually love me?" Bolo blurted out, making Shantae pause in disbelief.

"...What?" Shantae asked, barely comprehending what she had just heard. *Did he get hit on the head or something?* she wondered.

"She said she wanted to go out with me..."

"Bolo, seriously?" Shantae asked, flabbergasted by what she was hearing.

"She's the only woman who wanted to go out with me," Bolo murmured, turning around so that his back faced Shantae. "Maybe... just maybe... she really does. I think that skull she's wearing is controlling her."

"Bolo..." Shantae whispered, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. "I don't think she was being forced to say anything. She was just lying to you."

Bolo sighed. "It's fine. I guess I should be used to it at this point..."

“You’ll find somebody, I know it,” Shantae assured him as she patted him on the back, placing a small smile onto his lips. “Maybe just find somebody less... you know.”

“Good advice,” Bolo conceded.

“Now, where can I find Dribble Fountain?” Shantae asked.

“It’s between here and Scuttle Town,” Bolo stated.

“You’re saying I passed it?” Shantae asked incredulously. She had run far and wide, passing through a field, a forest, and a lake.

“Yeah, it’s right after Spider Forest,” Bolo explained.

Shantae closed her eyes, trying to imagine what he was talking about. She remembered she had seen large spiders hanging in the trees of the eponymous forest. She had moved quickly for any of them to have attacked her, however. She faintly remembered a stone column she had passed by along the way. The column had been spewing out water nonstop. She could only assume that that was what Bolo was talking about. “Did it look like a big water fountain?” Shantae quickly asked.

Bolo nodded. “Yep. You can’t miss it,” he stated, which got him a glare sent in his direction from the half-Genie. “Or maybe you can.”

Shantae looked around and noticed the various traps and obstacle courses put in place around her. She had been so busy she had not even noticed them. “Training, huh?” she observed.

“Gotta stay in shape somehow,” Bolo admitted as he scratched his head nervously.

“Come on, we gotta follow them,” Shantae said, turning around. “Ah!” she shrieked, tripping and slamming into the ground. “Ow,” she murmured, picking herself up. She looked behind her and noticed a small tripwire had been put in place, making her grumble. *Of course...*

“So this is it, huh?” Risky observed, watching the fountain’s endless supply of water flow downward. She pulled out the spike ball and aimed it at the hole ingrained in the stone column. With a single toss, the ball locked itself into the hole above the water.

Now if only you could pay attention as well as well as you aim, the voice snarked, making Risky groan. *This place truly feels like home to me,* the voice continued. *I've been here before, actually.*

Makes you wonder why they’d put the stone in here then, Risky replied.

Admittingly, it was a stroke of tremendous fortune, the voice conceded. *Coincidence happens so rarely to a single person they can’t believe it when it happens to them.*

Wait, if you've been here before, why didn't you tell me? Risky questioned.

You never asked what my relationship with this dungeon was.

I know I asked you before this started where I could find the stones.

I’m aware. You asked for a way I knew. And I guided you to the path where you could find all of them. Me knowing the directions to one of the locations will only get us so far. And besides, I thought you didn't need help?

Risky sighed, walking inside. From there, she saw walls made of black bricks surrounding her as well as wet floors with dripping ceilings. *You don’t take care of things, do you?*

I take care of you, the voice retorted. The floor began shaking, moving downward like an elevator. A new floor of concrete inserted itself from the walls, making it seem like nothing had happened.

Hardly, Risky replied. When the floor stopped moving, she could hear something in the background. She noticed a door in front of her, pushing it open. Inside this small room was a cage on her right, containing a sleeping woman in her early twenties. She blinked in disbelief. *You keep people down here?*

My magic ensures she has the necessary nutrients and luxuries like clothes and the sort. Magic is an astonishing thing sometimes.

How long has she been here?

Not sure. If memory serves, she was a child when she was first locked in here, the voice assumed, making Risky blink in surprise. *Relax. The magic I created for her cage kept her asleep this entire time. I installed numerous measures to keep her safe. She is a half-Genie like that purple-haired nuisance.*

How strong can one get? Risky asked.

Their powers aren't as strong as their parents, but it's good enough. For me, anyway.

Wanting to add this one's powers to your collection? Risky assumed.

I'll decide that when the time comes. For now, her power grows. It's the strongest magic I've seen since the original Genies were around.

Won't she have the vocabulary of a child when she wakes up? Risky asked.

No, her dreams are not of the typical variety. Imagine you lived entire life with your family who loved you and cared for you. And then you woke up. That is what she is experiencing.

This is low. Even for you, Risky said, gritting her teeth.

I have had very little influence over the life she's experienced in those dreams. My magic was of but one command: give her the life she could otherwise not have lived. My only other influence was having her parents tell her the true history of the Genies recently. This was not meant to be a punishment for her but a gift.

A gift? What kind of gift is telling a person their entire life has been a lie? Risky retorted.

I saved her from death. Without my magic, she would've starved or gotten killed by the monsters in this area. Any guardians she had

were missing at that time. And besides, this life is much better than the one she would've lived.

The only monster here is you.

Do not test my patience, Risky, the voice ordered. *If you think this is so bad, you wouldn't mind me waking her up now, would you?*

I'd rather her live in a fantasy than wake up to you guiding her.

It's not up to you.

I'm surprised you didn't keep her awake during this, Risky thought, crossing her arms as she studied the sleeping body. The woman was at least a few years older than Shantae, but Risky could only wonder how much stronger that would make the woman when she woke up.

There's no point in torturing the innocent, the voice replied. *She hasn't done anything wrong... yet. Not to mention, a Genie's magic grows stronger when they sleep.*

Risky rolled her eyes. *You wanted to kill the purple-haired one earlier. She didn't even know the history of the Genies. Yet, you wanted to kill her anyway.*

I will admit my temper sometimes gets the best of me, the voiced surmised. *Without others like you around, I might have gone berserk like I've done in the past. Let's wake her up, shall we?*

Risky sighed, looking back at the prisoner. The redheaded woman in the cage wore a torn brown shirt and ripped shorts of the same color. The cage she sat in had bars made of electricity that kept her from reaching out. "Where am I?" she asked, rubbing her head. She looked down at her body, seeing how much it had matured in the time she was asleep. *What is this?* she thought, horrified. She looked over to see Risky looking at her with confused eyes. "You," she murmured, jumping to her feet. "What did you do to my parents?" she snapped, recognizing the woman. A sudden thought popped into her brain. "No, no, no," she murmured, holding onto her aching cranium. It was as though a bomb of knowledge had

exploded inside her brain and she couldn't handle it all at once. She saw flashes of her mother and father. She saw hundreds of people trapped in cages, many of them malnourished and on the verge of death.

This was more than I expected, the voice admitted. *Perhaps I shouldn't have added that information about the Genies.*

Is she going to remember her fake life? Risky asked.

I wouldn't doubt it, although waking up might make things hazy. This was not a typical dream, so I'm uncertain of its ramifications.

The woman's head stopped throbbing when the flashing dissipated from her mind. Her parents were gone too. All that remained was a faint trace of their faces. *Where did they go? And what did the Genies do?* she wondered, recalling vaguely that she had been told of the Genies' greatest atrocities. The woman grabbed onto the bars, but her body was lit up with electricity. She shrieked as the electricity ruptured her body, forcing her to let go of the bars. Her messy red hair was now frizzy from the electricity, making her pat the hair down to normal, reaching down to her feet. "Tell me what you did to my parents, or I'll-"

It's so good to see you again, the voice stated to the woman, startling her. *My, how you've grown. I'm afraid that cage protecting you, it also neutralizes your powers. I can fix that in a little bit.*

"I don't know who that voice is, but I know you're behind this," the woman stated, locking eyes with Risky.

Hardly, the voice spoke to Risky while making sure the woman did not hear. The voice chuckled, echoing loudly across the dungeon, however, only Risky could hear the voice. The laughter only ceased when Risky had finally become unsettled by the sound of the voice. The voice returned to its conversation with the woman. *I love reunions, don't you Harmony?*

Chapter 4

Chapter 4

"Are you okay?" Bolo asked as she helped Shantae up after she had tripped over the tripwire.

"I think so," Shantae murmured, rubbing her ankle that now had a red mark across it. "Do you have anything that could help me out?" she asked, gesturing towards her ankle.

"I've got a potion," Bolo stated, holding up a small red flask.

"Where did you get that?" Shantae asked, surprised by how suddenly he had pulled out the flask. She had heard about the flasks that contained the potions. Supposedly, they contained a magical liquid that healed all wounds.

"From a shop. There was a discount to get three of them," Bolo said casually. "You want it or not?" he asked, shaking the flask.

"You know that stuff doesn't work, right?" Shantae pointed out. "It's just one of those stores saying it's magic when it's probably just freshwater."

"I'm pretty sure it works," Bolo replied. "The guy said no refunds, so I figured that meant it probably works."

Shantae facepalmed herself. "That's *not* how that works, Bolo," she sighed.

"So, should I drink it or...?" Bolo began before Shantae groaned and held out her hand.

"Give it to me," she replied. "It's not like it's going to hurt to try." Bolo nodded and handed over the flask. Shantae took the flask and downed it in a single gulp. "I don't feel any different," Shantae stated. "See, I told you-" She cut herself off as her ankle began to glow. A pink aura covered her wounds. The red mark in her ankle

faded and the pain, as well as the glowing aura, dissipated in seconds.

"Hey, it works!" Bolo exclaimed.

"Huh, guess so," Shantae murmured. *Going to have to check into that later.*

"Let's go get that stone," Bolo stated, pounding his fists together.

Shantae sighed. She figured that worst case scenario, Bolo could always distract Risky while she got the Elemental Stone. While Bolo was a skilled fighter, as well as the one who trained her how to fight, she was worried he would be immobilized by any attractive woman that came his way. "Just promise not to get distracted by any women."

"I promise to try," Bolo offered.

Shantae sighed. *What am I getting myself into?*

"Who is that?" Harmony asked, looking around the cage. The voice seemed oddly familiar, but she could not identify who the voice was.

Risky craned her neck, blinking in confusion while watching Harmony darting her eyes around. *Are you talking to her?* she asked. She awaited a response, but she heard nothing. *Hello?*

I apologize for the inconvenience, Harmony, the bony voice said sorrowfully. *It's been a long time since I was locked away. I'd recommend refraining from speaking out loud. That woman over there might hear you.*

You didn't answer my question, Harmony replied with suspicion. *Who are you?*

An old friend, the voice stated with a small sense of joy in his voice.

I don't remember you, Harmony thought as she crossed her arms.

"Hey! Are you talking to him?" Risky asked, interrupting Harmony's thought process.

That's my employee, the voice explained to Harmony. *If it makes you more comfortable, I will convince her to leave.* Harmony gave a single nod. The voice went inside Risky's head, infecting her thoughts. *I need you to go. Now.*

And why would I do that? Risky demanded with a huff.

Remember what happened to that blue-haired young man? the voice inquired. *Do you want to see what I showed him? Even in this weakened state, I still have enough power for one or two more today.*

Fine, Risky groaned as she walked out of the room. From experience, she had learned that he had possessed a limit to how often he could use this nightmarish power of illusion on others. *Two more and you're out of that nightmare juice for a week. And I know that trick won't work on people twice in one week.* Although she was unsure why this was the case, she assumed it was due to the natural limitations of the magic he had stolen.

She exited the dungeon and rested her back against the wall on the right of the open door.

I took care of her, the voice told Harmony.

How did you do that? Harmony questioned in disbelief. *She just left so easily.*

I have a natural talent in convincing people, the voice replied.

Uh huh, Harmony replied, unconvinced. *You say you're an old friend and yet I don't remember you at all.*

Well, I met you when you were a child, the voice explained.

Sure, Harmony replied, crossing her arms. *I need something more before I'm going to trust an invisible voice in my head.*

You know, you're much less cheerful than your mother was, the

voice observed. *She was almost always in a good mood when I saw her.*

"What do you know about my mother?!" Harmony demanded quickly, her heart racing. She had no clue where her family was, nor what had happened to them. If this voice could answer her questions, there was a chance she would not be as alone as she was now.

She was a friend of mine and... one of the few people who showed me any kindness, the voice said with sorrow.

How did you meet my mother? Harmony asked, placing her fingertips against her chest to slow down her heartbeat. *I just want to know where she is. And my father too.*

I'm afraid she is no longer with us, the voice stated, sending a chill down Harmony's spine. Her eyes became moist as she rubbed them quickly to dry them. She was thankful nobody else could see her like this.

And what about my father? Where is he?

He shares the same fate, the voice stated.

How do you know this? Harmony asked. *How did they die?*

That requires a long explanation. In the end, I had to bury my friends, the voice said. *It... was not a good day.*

How do I know you're not lying? Harmony demanded. *How do I know you're not manipulating me? How did they die?*

I will never lie to you, the voice promised. *As for the cause of their death, that is something I will have to tell you later when we are in more hospitable circumstances. I know I cannot make you trust me. You have to come to that decision yourself. But regardless of whether or not you trust me, I believe you should be aware of this should you have forgotten: your mother's name was Serena and your father's was Aaron.*

Harmony blinked in surprise as she took a deep breath. Before she

had awoken, she had been celebrating her parents' anniversary at their house. And now her memory of them had become foggy. But she was certain those were their names. She could see glimpses into her parents' personalities and treatment of her, but it did not feel concrete. *How did you know about my memory loss?*

Once again, a tale for a more hospitable setting, the voice assured her.

Harmony's face grimaced. She wanted to make sure she asked the most important question on her mind. Y*ou said you knew my parents. Tell me something about what my father was like.*

Tough, but caring, the voice answered. *Not as caring as your mother, but if you had met him, you'd know that he cared. And he had a scar on his right cheek. He told me he got it from shaving.*

That sounds like him, Harmony realized, remembering her father was a bit more hard on her than her mother had been. But he had still loved her all the same. And the scar felt eerily familiar.

Be careful of how you do it, she could hear her father's voice in her head. *You don't want to end up with one of these.*

But scars are so cool! She could hear a much younger version of herself so mystified over his scar. *I want one when I get older!*

Thank you, Harmony said to the voice as a small smile formed on her lips. There was still some doubt cast over her mind, but something about this voice felt truthful. Although she could never see it, the voice smiled back at her. *I've been meaning to ask, why do you sound like that? You sound like you're dying.*

The voice chuckled slightly. *I've been dying my entire life,* he replied. *It's a side effect of one of the curses my enemies inflicted upon me.*

So you don't have a body or anything? Harmony guessed.

I used to, but it has long since been taken from me, the voice explained. *The body I had previously wasn't very pretty look to at, either.*

Why did it get taken from you? Harmony asked.

That is a story for another time, the voice explained. *I only ask for one thing. Please help me get back to normal.*

Harmony took a deep breath as she looked around the electrified cage. *Even if I wanted to help you, I can't do much with this cage around me.*

Perhaps I can assist you with that. Your mother passed down an incredible gift to you. It can only be done through a magical dance.

A dance? Are you serious? Harmony asked, raising an eyebrow.

Even after all these years, dancing for a powerup still seems really silly, her father's words echoed into her head.

Yeah, what Dad said! she could hear her little self exclaim.

At least I know where I get that from, Harmony thought.

As silly as it may sound, it is quite effective for what you wish to accomplish. For this, you must first begin dancing with a rhythm.

Ok then, Harmony replied, a bit confused by the voice's advice. She moved her legs back and forth quickly, attempting to find a rhythm. She let the rest of her body follow the pattern established in her legs, moving the flow into her hips, shoulders, and elbows. *Is this right?*

You're getting there, the voice stated. *There is just one more step. You need to channel that power into a single burst of energy.*

And how do I do that?

That is for you to decide. I cannot help you any further. Your mother was able to figure it out on her own. I'm sure you can too.

Harmony nodded as she concentrated on visualizing her parents. She could see faint traces of them, but it was difficult to put the pieces together. For a brief instant, she was able to see both of them. She saw an older woman that resembled her, but had more

tranquility in her life. She witnessed the power her mother possessed: the ability to shake the very Earth itself. She could also see her father, who had a muscular appearance and was a gladiator with a mighty hammer. She was not sure how accurate these images were, but she was certain it was them. She held her hands in the air as a steel mallet formed out of thin air. She was surprised by how light it seemed in her hands compared to its massive size. She slammed the hammer into the ground and it began to tremble. The floor she stood upon cracked and broke into pieces as the area around her shook like an earthquake.

Outside the dungeon, Risky could feel the building shaking as the sensation rode up against her back. *What is going on in there?* she wondered.

Harmony crashed into the ground a few feet below her as the hammer dissipated into thin air.

Harmony rubbed her aching elbows as she picked herself up. Besides the injury she had received, she felt very lethargic. *Why am I so tired?* Harmony asked as she yawned.

Magic can take a lot of you, the voice explained. *With more experience, that gift of yours will come at less of a cost.*

I'm guessing you know about this stuff from my mom, Harmony surmised. She was beginning to recall some of her past experiences with her mother. She could see her mother reading her bedtime stories about the wonderful world of magic and puppies. Well, there were no puppies, but a young Harmony had asked her mother to add them to the story, to which she had obliged.

I've learned about magic from her and many others in my time, the voice replied. *You might want to be careful.*

Why?

You are going to have a visitor soon.

Risky closed her eyes as she tried to concentrate. *I'll finally be rid of him,* she thought, imagining a clear head for once.

You'd like that, wouldn't you? the voice snarked at her. *Even if you and I separated, you'd be back and you know it.*

Why can't you leave me alone? Risky demanded.

You're the one who took me with you, the voice replied with a chuckle. *You can let me go whenever you want. You just need to get those stones.*

When I do, you are never going to see me again.

Acting like you're in control, the voice said with a laugh. *I like that. You've still got that fighting spirit from the day we first met, Risky.*

Risky sighed. *Don't you have something else to do?*

I do, the voice admitted. *The purple-haired half-Genie and her blue-haired friend will be arriving soon. Don't let them see you. They will be of aid to us.*

Fine, Risky groaned as she heard two voices coming from a distance.

"Are you sure this is it, Bolo?" Shantae asked.

"Pretty sure it is," Bolo stated.

"You didn't mix up the directions again, right?" Shantae asked, thinking about a time where Bolo had mixed up East with West when reading a map during a camping trip.

"I only did that once!" Bolo insisted.

Risky rubbed her head as she raced to the side of the dungeon and hid behind one of the trees surrounding the exterior. *How does anybody listen to that?* she wondered, her head aching from their conversation. *This plan of yours better work, old man.*

"Looks like she opened the door," Risky could hear Shantae saying.

"Better be on guard," Bolo advised.

Harmony walked throughout the dungeon. This place was unlike anything she had been raised in, at least from what she could recall. The bright blue floor was damp and slippery, making her cautious as she walked throughout different rooms. She looked upward to see a door close to the ceiling, located on another floor. She could not see any stairs and she noticed that there were bony skeletons that popped in and out of holes within the walls. She noticed the skeletons had appeared in practically every room she had passed in apart from the room she had previously been in.

What are those things? she asked, disgusted by how little life was actually present in the chamber.

I call them Bone Worms, the voice stated. *They are meant to deter intruders. It's best not to touch them, unless you're fine with becoming left-handed.*

How do you know what they are? Harmony questioned.

They are creatures I gave life to a long time ago, the voice explained. *I wanted to make sure nobody could just trespass so easily.*

What is somebody going to do in a dungeon? Harmony asked. *This place isn't exactly hospitable.*

Steal a valuable object and sell it for pointless currency, the voice explained. *There is a stone in here that belongs to me. It is the key to freeing me from this prison.*

Where is it? Harmony asked. *Maybe I can get it for you.*

You are too kind, the voice stated. *However, I expect somebody to retrieve the stone for me. A purple-haired girl who is younger than you. She intends to take the stone, which will be given to me later on. There are many people who desire this stone, and many who want it for misguided purposes.*

So, should I tell her about what's going on with you? Harmony offered.

No need, the voice assured her. *All I ask is that you teach her that*

dancing trick. It is essential for all Genies, be it half or full.

She's a Genie? Harmony blinked in surprise. *Does she know anything about my parents?*

I'm afraid not, the voice stated, prompting a sigh from the redhead. *Don't be disappointed, Harmony. You will learn everything you desire to know soon enough.*

Harmony nodded. *I just have one more question. What do I call you?*

What an interesting question, the voice said with a hearty laugh. *I have not gone by my real name in a long time,* the voice said with a hint of sorrow coating his words. *I have only told my name to people I trust. And Harmony, I believe you are one of them.*

I am? Harmony asked, surprised by the voice's certainty.

Yes. You may call me... Jack.

Ok, Jack, Harmony murmured.

It is not a name said often anymore, Jack stated. *The girl and a friend of hers is approaching. Remember what I've told you,* he advised as his voice echoed in her head. *I can tell you more about your parents when we're alone,* Jack said, his voice dissipating.

Shantae and Bolo walked into the dungeon as Harmony slowly walked into the same room as them. Bolo's jaw dropped as he locked eyes with Harmony. The woman appeared to be a bit older than him and was absolutely gorgeous. He could not take his eyes off her. Every part of her look radiated some form of beauty as he became frozen like a statue.

Shantae noticed this and facepalmed herself. *Dang it, Bolo,* she groaned before looking back at Harmony. *Why is there another person here?* She assumed a confident body position and put on a facade of toughness. "Are you with Risky?" she asked, making Harmony tilt her head.

"Who?" she asked.

"The pirate lady," Shantae stated. "She's trying to get the Elemental Stone in this dungeon and use it to unleash a terrible monster."

These people are not informed on what is truly going on with Risky, Jack spoke to Harmony. *I will inform them later. Just act natural.*

"I'm not with her," Harmony assured her. "Who are you?" She looked down and noticed Shantae's outfit. "And what's with your outfit?" she asked, somewhat unnerved by Shantae's outfit.

Shantae's eyes snapped open. "What's wrong with what I'm wearing?" she shouted, almost startling Harmony. Nobody had ever asked her such a question before.

"It's just... a bit much," Harmony commented, put off by its revealing nature.

You try living in a town that's ninety degrees everyday without wearing something like this! Shantae wanted to yell, but she bit her tongue. She took a deep breath and calmed herself down. "Sorry I got a little angry there," she quickly apologized.

"It's fine," Harmony stated calmly.

"My name's Shantae," the purple-haired half-Genie stated, pointing her left index finger towards herself. "What's yours?"

"Harmony."

"That's a beautiful name," Bolo interjected, never taking his eyes off Harmony.

Harmony chuckled, finding Bolo's infatuation adorable. "Thank you," she stated. *Hope he's actually got a brain,* she thought.

Bolo shook his head, snapping back to his senses. "Hey, wait a minute. Why were you in that dungeon?"

Good, he can actually think, Harmony thought with a sigh of relief. Regarding his question, she shrugged. "I don't know. It's all... kind of a blur."

"You don't remember anything?" Shantae asked.

"I remember stuff..." Harmony murmured. "It's foggy, but some of it's coming back here and there. Like a box of puzzle pieces spilled out and the pieces are slowly connecting together. The last thing I remember was celebrating my parents' anniversary with them and then they were just gone... I remember that my dad was human and my mom was a Genie."

Shantae quickly wrapped her arms around Harmony, astonishing the redhead. "I didn't know there was more like me!" she exclaimed. "I thought I was the only one!"

The hug Shantae was giving Harmony had a certain warmth to it that the latter had not felt for a long time. Harmony slowly placed her arms around Shantae and hugged her back. When the hug finally ceased, Harmony felt a ping of sadness consume her heart. She did not want the hug to end.

"How did you end up here? Were you trapped or something?" Shantae questioned.

"And how do we know for sure you aren't with Risky?" Bolo asked.

"Look, I don't know to explain it. You're just going to have to trust me," Harmony insisted. *Great. Now I* really *sound like I'm with that pirate,* she realized.

Bolo looked to Shantae, whispering in her ear. "We need to be careful. She might be pulling the same trick Risky pulled on me."

Shantae cupped her hands, whispering back into Bolo's ear. "Maybe, but she's a half-Genie like me. She might know something about my mom and dad."

Bolo glanced back at Harmony for a brief moment. Her beauty was captivating, but it all could have been another setup to make him or Shantae divulge more information to whoever her boss was. "We can't take that chance," he whispered to Shantae. "She might look pretty, but she could be lying."

"Bolo, you're the only one who thinks she's pretty," Shantae pointed

out through whispers.

Bolo groaned. "You get what I'm saying," he said quietly.

Harmony sighed. "I know you guys don't trust me," she said. "Maybe I can do something that can change that."

Shantae blinked. "And what would that be?" she asked curiously.

"Are you familiar with magic?" Harmony asked.

Shantae rotated her left hand in the air with a sense of uncertainty. "A little."

"The best way to channel the magic in you is through dancing."

Shantae's eyes widened excitedly. "Really? I love dancing!" she exclaimed, surprising Harmony. "So I just do it and that unlocks my magic?"

"Something like that," Harmony stated, placing her hands on her hips. "When you do manage to capture a rhythm, find a way to let the energy burst out of you. It will be like a sudden rush to you when it activates."

"Got it," Shantae stated, giving a thumbs up. "Thanks, Harmony. That's a big help." She thought to herself eagerly, *Maybe this is what I've been missing, especially if my magic's kicked in by now.*

Harmony's smile faded, hearing a certain voice whisper into her ear. *You should get going,* Jack suggested. *Before they keep asking more questions. The type of questions you can't answer.*

Why? Harmony asked. *They seem like alright people.*

"Hey, do you remember if your mom was friends with any purple-haired Genies?" Shantae asked.

"I don't know," Harmony admitted sheepishly. *I'm starting to see what you mean...*

"Oh..." Shantae murmured. *Guess she wouldn't know anything*

about my parents...

Harmony rubbed her elbow nervously, hoping the questions would stop there. "I need to go. I need to see... an old friend. I haven't seen him in years and I think I should let him know what's happened."

Shantae placed a comforting hand on Harmony's shoulder. "Go. If this person's that important to you, you should let them know you're alright." She patted Harmony's shoulder and grinned. "But I'd better see you again. Meeting another half-Genie isn't something that happens every day. We've got to stick together."

Harmony considered Shantae's words. As far as she knew, Shantae and herself were the last to hold the Genies' lineage. *Maybe she's right,* she thought. She gave Shantae a nod. "You can bet on it," she said, smiling.

"Hey, do you have a number I can call you on?" Shantae asked.

"I don't really carry a phone," Harmony murmured.

"Oh," Shantae whispered. "That's ok!" she said, attempting to quickly change her demeanor. "We'll see each other again. I know it."

Harmony smiled, giving a nod before walking away. That walk turned into a sprint, letting herself disappear into the forest.

"Are you sure that was a good idea?" Bolo asked, crossing his arms.

Shantae shrugged. "I don't know, but I get a good vibe from her. I guess we'll have to find out."

Chapter 5

Chapter 5

This chapter is quite a bit longer to make up for how long the wait has been. Also, I didn't want to make this two chapters.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Harmony's stomach growled as she wandered throughout the forest. She was currently traversing through Tangled Forest. The area she walked in was covered in vines, making it difficult not to become entangled in certain plant life. The plant life was mostly peaceful, which she was thankful for. *Are we close to any place with food?* she asked the voice, holding onto her stomach.

Very, Jack replied.

How am I going to pay for this? I don't really have any money, Harmony pointed out.

We'll cross that bridge when we get to it, Jack explained to her. *In the meantime, you might want to keep your eyes open.*

Harmony's pointed ears perked up as she heard a hissing sound. She looked upward at the tree branches to the left and right of her. A giant spider zipped down from the tree branches on a web line and spat fireballs at her. Her eyes snapped open as she began dashing ahead of the fireballs numerous times to avoid getting set ablaze. At the same time, patches of grass lit up behind her. *That's not good,* she realized worriedly as she stopped in her tracks.

Allow me, Jack stated. Within an instant, the fires extinguished themselves, leaving behind small burnt patches of grass instead.

The spider, in a moment of fright, zipped back up into the trees, shaking from the aura that infiltrated the area.

How did you do that? Harmony asked.

While I'm much weaker than I was before, I can still use my abilities in smaller cases of danger, he explained.

How did you scare off the spider? Harmony questioned, looking up to the trees. *It just left so... quickly.*

I have a way of making people listen to me, Jack explained. *The local food shop is nearby in case you're still hungry.*

Harmony looked behind her, seeing a small house made out of grey bricks. Purple shingles decorated the top of the house while a wooden sign was hung up on the side of the building. A chimney connected to the house shot out smoke every ten seconds, covering the sky in a foggy mess. "Emma's Cooking," Harmony read out loud. She gently knocked his fist against the wooden door, only for it to suddenly fall over. "What the...?" Harmony wondered, blinking in disbelief.

"Ooh! A customer!" an eager voice shouted. A girl, seventeen years of age, raced up to Harmony, startling the redhead. This girl wore a bright pink apron with a blue pouch on the bottom portion of the clothing, red-and-white striped socks, magenta boots, bright pink gloves, and a white toque that made her appear taller than she was. Finally, the girl had long blonde hair with a large strand on each side of her head and that reached past her waist. She was also extremely short, standing at 4'11. She had stars in her eyes as Harmony slowly backed away. "I can't believe it! I haven't had a customer in..." She quickly paused as she tapped her index finger against her chin. "...since I opened this place up... I think."

"Wait... what?" Harmony asked, both confused and slightly disturbed by the energy the chef girl could output in such a short amount of time.

"Oh yeah. I opened this shop of mine up a couple of weeks ago. So far, I've had only one customer."

"And who was that?" Harmony questioned, raising an eyebrow.

"You, of course!" Emma exclaimed.

"Oh..." Harmony murmured in surprise. "Well, I don't have any..." She felt something land in her right hand. She looked down and saw several small gems in her hand.

You're welcome, Jack told her.

"Patience?" Emma guessed with a smile, snatching the gems from Harmony. "Me neither!"

What is this girl's deal? Harmony wondered.

Emma clasped her hands together. "So... what would you like?"

"Uh... what do you have?" Harmony asked.

"Well, I've got some donuts I made," Emma replied, picking up a tray that was previously sitting on a table. The tray had three donuts in view. One was glazed, the second one had sprinkles, and the third one had pink frosting. "You can have them all if you like!"

Harmony picked up the glazed donut first and took a bite out of it. Every nerve in her body came alive as the food illuminated her taste buds. She began grazing through the rest of the donut before snatching the other two. Memories of the sweet delight floated around in her mind. Ever since she was a child, this food never failed to satisfy her.

Emma blinked in disbelief. No one had *ever* liked her food so much before. Harmony had finished the other two donuts as quickly as she had the first, leaving small specks of sprinkles and frosting to hover around her lips.

"Do you have anymore?" she asked.

"Uh... not sure," Emma said nervously. "I can go take a look if you'd like..."

Harmony smiled. "I'd like that," she spoke confidently, placing her

hands on her hips. *I feel so alive!* she wanted to exclaim.

That's because it has sugar, Jack told her. *For non-Genies, it's like a boost to their system, albeit an unhealthy one. It doesn't last very long before they eventually crash,* he explained. *For those who are a Genie, they provide much more than a boost. It helps fuel their magic to an extraordinary degree.*

Harmony looked at her hands, which were shaking like a tremor. *I feel like I could use my magic forever.*

A full Genie could live off sugar forever if they wanted to, Jack stated. *It's a very natural part of their diet.*

But I'm not a full Genie, Harmony realized. *So, will all that sugar make me crash too?*

If you have too much, your human half might cause a crash after a while, Jack explained.

Harmony nodded. *Got it. Don't overload.* The sound of barking and a bell ringing came at Harmony in mere seconds. A small brown dog ran up to her knees. The dog had white paws and mouth as well as having the tip of its tail also be white. He wore a blue collar with a small golden bell attached to it. The dog began jumping up and down, trying to lick Harmony's face.

"Aw..." Harmony murmured, bending down to scratch behind his ears. The dog's tail wagged back and forth like a whirlwind as he kept jumping up and down.

"I guess Wobble Bell likes you," Emma stated, returning with two more donuts. Harmony grabbed the food and immediately chowed down.

"He's sweet," Harmony replied, petting his head. She looked around and saw a food bag knocked over with a hole ripped in it and a pail of water next to it. "Is that where he sleeps?" she asked, noticing the lack of a bed or a kennel. The pail had barely any water left and the food bag was nearly empty.

"Yeah..." Emma murmured, looking over to the living space. "I was

hoping to use the money to get him some more food... and maybe a bed."

"Where do you sleep?" Harmony asked.

"On the ground," Emma said with a shrug, returning to her normally cheerful demeanor. "I'm sure all the greatest chefs in the world started off small."

"Greatest chefs?" Harmony asked.

Emma nodded. "Yep. I'm going to be one of the most famous chefs in the world someday."

"What about your dog?" Harmony asked, slightly worried about the dog's living situation.

"He'll be there right with me!" Emma exclaimed. "Once I'm financially stable, I'll be able to relax with him for a change."

"What does he do while you're cooking?"

"He just sleeps or goes for a walk," Emma stated. "He's pretty smart, so he stays out of trouble. I even made a little doggy door for him," she said, pointing at the door that had collapsed. A small wooden plank rested at the bottom of the door, allowing for an easy exit for the dog. "Oh, right..." she realized, noticing that the door had fallen off its hinges. "That's going to take a while to fix."

"I can get it," Harmony offered, walking over to the door. She pulled it up and pushed it forward. She managed to fit it back in place. Suddenly, the door magically connected back to the hinges it had broken away from.

You're welcome, Jack stated.

Harmony grinned as she turned around.

"How'd you do that?" Emma asked, baffled by the red magical aura surrounding the door. The aura soon dissipated as the door locked in place. "Was that magic?"

"It's hard to explain," Harmony stated awkwardly, prompting a small groan from Emma.

"I was wondering if you were one of those magical Genies," Emma admitted with a nervous smile. "They say it's good luck if you're visited by one."

Harmony chuckled. "Wouldn't that be something?" she said, trying to maintain her calm composure.

It's time to go, Jack advised her. *I need to tell you something in private.*

Such as? Harmony asked.

You wanted me to answer questions from before, yes? I can tell you more about what has happened if you wish.

Harmony nodded. *Yes.*

Then, it is time to go.

Ok. Harmony looked back at Emma, who was now sitting and petting Wobble Bell's head. She noticed Emma had moved her face away from Harmony's view. She inched closer and noticed that although Emma was smiling, the expression itself seemed insincere. *She feels like someone I knew.*

Another vision popped into her brain. This time was that of a small girl with blonde hair that had been braided into pigtails and had a bang that covered her right eye. This girl was extremely reticent most of the time, preferring to listen rather than to speak. However, when something excited her, she got into the speaking mood not unlike Emma. However, Emma was far more hyper. *Who is that?* Harmony questioned.

What is it, Harmony? Jack asked.

I'm seeing someone I don't think I have before. I just remember a small blonde-haired girl. It's like I know her. Did my parents have anymore kids besides me?

I don't know. I wasn't always around them, and I don't recall Serena telling me about this child.

I think this girl might have been my sister. I'm just trying to remember her name. It wasn't a name you'd usually see.

In this child's defense, you don't have a typical name either, Jack pointed out. *It may not be so easy to think of her name.*

I think it started with a P. Patricia? No, that's not it. Penelope? No. It had a pl- sound at the start of it. Plink. I think that's it.

Perhaps we can continue this discussion elsewhere, Jack suggested.

Yeah, you're right, Harmony agreed. "I need to get going," she told Emma.

"Oh," Emma murmured, picking herself up. "I get it. You're probably busy."

"Yeah," Harmony said with a small frown as she turned around.

"Wait," Emma said, making Harmony stop. "Could you come back sometime? You've been the best customer I've had yet."

Harmony grinned. "Sure," she stated. "Next week. I promise."

Emma smiled once more, although this expression had more candor than the previous one. "Thank you."

Shantae looked up, seeing the ceiling that hung yards above their heads. She noticed that there was an opening high above them in the wall. "Maybe that's where the stone is," she assumed.

"But how do we get up there?" Bolo asked, looking up. Something leaped in front of his face, making him fall onto his back.

"Bolo!" Shantae shouted, rushing to help her friend up. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Just startled," Bolo murmured. "What is that thing?"

"Looks like a worm made of... bones?" Shantae asked, baffled by what she was seeing. A creature that was nothing but a bony skeleton popped in and out of a hole it resided within. Its face had empty eye sockets and razor-sharp teeth that it snapped together whenever it popped out of its hole. "What are these things?"

"Maybe they're guard dogs," Bolo suggested.

"Dogs are cute. These aren't," Shantae said with a shudder. She looked around, noticing how compact the walls of the current room were, with the skeletons appearing through both walls. "Maybe I can try out what Harmony told me."

Bolo blinked in confusion. "Are you sure that's a good idea? She may not have been telling us the truth."

Shantae shrugged. "It can't hurt to try." *Please let there be some magic in me,* she thought worriedly before attempting to calm herself down. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, letting her heart become still. She slowly opened her eyes and let her body start shaking, putting her energy into her legs, moving back and forth quickly. She moved that energy up to her hips, creating a new synergy. She began dancing on one foot and then the other before alternating between the two. *Hope this works,* she thought. She put her right arm into the air, putting all of her energy into her wrist. A purple light wrapped itself around her body, enveloping the room with its aura. *It worked!* Shantae thought excitedly.

When the light dissipated, Shantae's body had shrunk, having become a fraction of her former self. Her ponytail had broken down and reformed itself into a normal tail attached to her backside. Her arms turned purple as fur covered all of her body except for her face, stomach, hands, feet, and tail. The rest of her body turned a pale pink as her eyes changed to a larger, rounder shape. Her tiara had shrunk down with her, fitting perfectly on her forehead.

What the? Shantae wondered, looking at her hands, which had become so tiny. She tilted her head, seeing her tail wagging in the air. *Is that my ponytail? Wait... I'm a monkey?* she realized. *That can*

climb... I think.

"Shantae, where'd you go?" Bolo asked, looking around.

Bolo, I'm right here, Shantae tried to say, but instead chatter popped out of her mouth.

Bolo looked down and shouted as he fell over again. He quickly got up and grabbed the monkey. "Where's Shantae? What did you do with her?!" he shouted, shaking her. *I knew she shouldn't have used that magic this soon! Now she's been replaced with a magic monkey and I don't know where she went.*

Bolo! It's me! Shantae screeched in her monkey form. *Stop shaking me! I'm going to be sick!*

"Wait..." Bolo murmured, briefly pausing. "Maybe I should shake you upside down. Then you'll talk," he said with a cheerful grin.

Bolo, no! Shantae screamed, shaking her head. She pointed upward to her tiara repeatedly, making Bolo come to a halt.

"Shantae?" he realized, staring at the blue gem in the tiara. "Your mom's sapphire.." he recognized, remembering that Shantae had been wearing the gemstone since the day they met. "Is it really you?"

Shantae nodded as her heart raced. *Yes!* she chattered. *Please let me go!*

"Sorry," Bolo murmured, placing Shantae on the ground. "I got scared and..."

It's fine. We just need to get moving, Shantae said to him.

"I... can't understand you," he stated.

Oh... Shantae thought. *That's going to take some getting used to.* She let out a deep breath and looked upward, locking her eyes with the opening in the wall in front of her. She leaped onto the wall, above the worm's head. She latched her fingers onto the wall, securing herself against the wall. *Everything is so big,* she thought,

looking around her. She began dashing up the wall, moving left and right while dodging the worms popping out of the wall. She noticed she was coming up to the entrance and leaped into the opening. She scratched an itch behind her ears and let out a yawn. She began to study her newfound body. It was much faster than her human form, but she did not see that much use for it in terms of fighting.

She closed her eyes, allowing the space around her to become devoid of sound. Her fingernails grew in length, transforming instantly into claws. *Woah,* she thought, observing the razor sharp texture of the claws. While not much longer than her monkey form's typical fingernails, they would certainly help out in combat. *This is cool, but my hair whip would probably reach farther,* she assumed. *I wonder if I can do anything else.* She closed her eyes once more, clearing her thoughts as her world became consumed by clouds of magical dust. She opened them again and... nothing happened. *Huh,* she thought, slightly disappointed. *Maybe if I...* She crossed her fingers together, but the same result occurred. She began doing a handstand, balancing on her two hands. She then balanced herself on her tail alone. *Guess this tail is stronger than it looks,* she observed. *Not that useful, though. Eh, I'll figure it out later.* A new thought popped into her tiny brain. *Is this the only transformation I can turn into? Wait... how do I turn back? Is there a time limit or something?*

A purple light engulfed her body as the purple fur shed from her body and faded into nothingness. Her tiara and gemstone returned to its normal size as her red harem pants, matching bra, and golden jewelry covered her body. She let out a deep breath as she patted her head, making sure that her ponytail was still in place. She checked the rest of her body and sighed a breath of relief. *Really glad my clothes came back,* she thought. She placed her fingertips against the jewel in her tiara and smiled. *I feel like I'm forgetting something...* she realized.

Bolo landed on the ground as he gasped for air. His heart was racing as he slowly picked himself up. He rubbed his hip as he groaned. "Those things hurt," he murmured, holding a mace that he typically carried as his weapon. He had used the weapon's other

function as a grappling hook to pull himself upward. Unfortunately for him, Shantae noticed his wounds he had acquired along the way. A patch of blood stained the right side of his shirt, of which there was a tear in the fabric.

"Bolo, are you okay?" Shantae asked, grimacing as she noticed his wound. "I'm sorry. I should have helped you up and..."

Bolo merely shrugged as he began walking forward. "It's fine," he insisted, putting his mace into his pocket. He considered himself fortunate that the weapon could shrink down the spike ball on top and place it inside the handle.

"Maybe you should use a potion," she suggested.

Bolo shook his head. "Nah. I'll be alright," he stated before Shantae walked in front of him.

"Bolo, you're bleeding," she said sternly, crossing her arms. "Please, just take the potion."

"But there'll only be one left if I do," Bolo said hesitantly. "That'll limit us until we get to the next town."

Shantae sighed as she rubbed her temples. "Bolo, please," she insisted.

Her blue-haired friend sighed as he pulled out a small red flask from his pocket. He downed the flask's contents in a matter of seconds and wiped his dripping lip. The wound that had been bleeding suddenly glowed before the tears in his skin patched itself up. "Good as new," he said with a smile. "I wonder if these things can grow back limbs..." he said, eyeing the flask.

Shantae winced. "Let's not test the theory," she suggested.

Bolo laughed nervously. "Right," he murmured. He handed her the last potion. "Hold onto it. In case you need it."

Shantae stared at the vial, nervously hovering her hand towards it. "You sure it won't need it more?" she asked.

Bolo shook his head. "You're more important, here.'

"Don't say that," Shantae said, placing the vial back in Bolo's hand. "I know Mimic wanted you to protect me, but I'm not about to let you die for me."

"I'm not doing this for Mimic," Bolo stated. "I'm doing it for you. I know you a lot more than I do Mimic. You've always been there for me. You're my best friend, Shantae. I don't want to see you get hurt. No matter what."

"...Thanks," Shantae murmured, slowly taking back the vial and placing it back into her pocket.

"Anytime," Bolo smiled brightly. "Hey, I wonder if they got a non-healing version of this stuff. It tastes pretty good."

Shantae blinked. "Huh?" she asked.

"Yeah, it tastes like honey," he pointed out.

"It tastes like milk to me," Shantae replied, baffled by what Bolo could come up with.

"Do you think it tastes different for half-Genies or something?" Bolo wondered.

Shantae shrugged. "We could always ask Harmony and see what she thinks."

Bolo sighed. "Something feels off about her."

Shantae raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"What if she's doing all this to steal something from us?" Bolo questioned. "You know, like Risky did to me?"

"I know you're worried, but I don't think she's going to do that."

Bolo sighed. "I hope you're right."

"At least she's not crazy," Shantae pointed out. "That's got to count

for something."

"Yeah," Bolo agreed. He crossed his arms. "It's just... confusing."

"What do you mean?" Shantae asked.

"She's prettier than a lot of girls I've met, but... so was Risky. I want to be friends with her, but I don't know if she's going to stab us in the back."

Shantae sighed. "We'll keep an eye on her. Don't worry."

"Yeah," Bolo agreed before sighing. "I hope she's okay."

Shantae raised an eyebrow. "Which one?"

Bolo paused to consider her question. "Risky, I guess," he admitted. "She seems like she needs help."

"No kidding," Shantae agreed. "I just hope we can talk her down or something. She doesn't seem... evil, you know? Maybe just a little angry... and confused."

"And pretty," Bolo muttered, making Shantae give him a look. "Sorry, she is," he apologized.

"You say that about every woman," Shantae pointed out.

"Yeah. It's just... she was nice to me," Bolo murmured. "That's just so... weird to me," he admitted.

Shantae placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "It shouldn't be," she assured him with a smile.

Bolo nodded. "I know, but it still is. And then, there's Harmony. She's sweet, but I don't want her to be a repeat of Risky."

"I get that," Shantae agreed. "She won't be. I know it."

Bolo crossed his arms. "I'm starting to feel like you only trust her because she's a half-Genie."

"What? No," Shantae insisted. Putting aside the connection she

shared with Harmony, she had sensed no ill intent from the redhead.

"If she wasn't, would you trust her as much as you do?" Bolo asked.

Shantae blinked, considering his question. Her words to the mayor rang in her head. *Mayor, I feel like you're picking me because of* what *I am rather than* who *I am.* She rubbed her temples, trying to concentrate. She couldn't help but notice an irony of previous statements. *I'm no better,* she conceded. "Probably not," she said sheepishly before she tightened her fists. "But I know that she's a good person. Please trust me on this."

Bolo sighed. "I will. Just be right about it."

"Thank you," Shantae replied, sighing a breath of relief. "Let's get back to the mission," she suggested.

Bolo nodded as the duo began walking forward. The room they currently resided was unmarked, lacking the Bone Worms from the previous rooms. Instead, it was merely chipped with grey paint. Very little life filled the room as the only sounds that could be heard were drips of water leaking from the walls. When they entered the doorless chamber at the end of the hallway, they saw a sky blue rectangular stone floating in the air. It floated above a small stone column in the front of the room.

Go forth, Tendrix, a voice said to the room, sending a chill down Shantae and Bolo's spines. *Take them down.*

A creature floated out of the darkness. Its body consisted of a blue, oblong metal that acted as its base. Four green tentacles hung below the hatch of its body as green spikes acted as ears for itself. Its single white eyeball began bulging outward. Veins began popping out as the eye grew in size and turned green. Despite not having a mouth, it managed to let out an ear-piercing screech that shook the building.

"What is that thing?!" Shantae shouted, covering her ears.

"What? I can't hear you!" Bolo shouted, also covering his ears.

Shantae groaned. "I said..."

Tendrix slammed itself into Bolo, sending him flying into the wall. Bricks fell onto Bolo's body as he struggled to move. "Ow..."

"Bolo!" Shantae shouted, rushing after the creature. Tendrix wrapped one of its appendages around Bolo's neck and pulled him upward.

Bolo gasped for air as his windpipe became constricted. His face began turning blue as his vision was becoming murky. He pulled out his mace and activated the spike ball on top. He slammed the mace into Tendrix's eye, making it shriek as it released Bolo.

"Bolo, the weak point is the eye," Shantae stated, helping her friend upward. Her friend, although he could now stand, he had trouble keeping balance.

Shantae began to charge at the creature, leaping into the air as she pulled her neck back. Tendrix used two of its tentacles to block Shantae's hair whip. One of its other tentacles wrapped itself around Shantae's ankles, trapping her in place. Using its forth tentacle, it began slapping her back and forth repeatedly. Shantae stood there dazed as it wrapped its three remaining tentacles around her neck. The tendrils constricted her throat tightly, making her gasp for air. She could feel her lungs getting crushed more and more by the second.

Bolo's mace slammed into Tendrix's head once more, making it bleed as it released Shantae from its grip. It flew upward as it kept bleeding, preventing either of the two from reaching it. Shantae reached into her pocket, feeling shards of glass pierce her fingers. She flinched from the pain while also making a realization. *That thing broke the potion.*

"Uh… what's it doing?" Bolo asked, watching Tendrix smack its head between the walls in the room. Cracks began forming as the creature kept attacking the concrete. Water burst out of the cracks, filling the room's floor.

"It's trying to drown us," Shantae realized. "Let's just get the stone and get out of here." She looked to her right, seeing the stone had gone missing. All that stood was an empty altar. "Risky..." she

growled.

More water exploded through the walls, startling the half-Genie. Chunks of rubble fell from the ceiling, with some pieces landing dangerously close to the duo. "We gotta get out of here," Bolo stated. One chunk of rock exploded on Bolo's head, making drop in an instant.

"Bolo!" Shantae screamed. She tried picking him up, but she realized they'd be squashed flat by the time she carried him out. Neither of them were in good condition before either. She began dancing, hoping she could transform into the monkey again. *I hope that thing is strong enough to carry him. Maybe it's got super strength I don't know about. Or maybe I can turn into something else with a different pose at the end.*

She mimicked her prior movements from the previous dance, but began to lose her balance halfway through. She managed to quickly regain her footing and made one last thrust with her hand being held upward. Her body did not shrink, however. Instead, the bones inside her arms began to stretch out as her fingers sunk into each hand. Blue fur now covered her body as her ponytail now transformed into a sharper and wispy hairstyle that also made her hair sky blue. Her toes fused together and turned black, becoming claws while her legs were turning purple. Her jewelry on his wrists had moved down to her ankles in this form as they no longer fit there anymore. Her tiara remained in place much like it did with the previous transformation.

What the? Shantae wondered, looking at her feathered hands. *I'm a bird?* She looked down and noticed her bra had turned dark blue. *At least I'm still covered,* she thought with a sense of relief. *Wait... why does the bird have this? The monkey doesn't have this. Maybe I screwed up the dance or something...* She noticed chunks of rocks had landed inches away from her feet, nearly giving her a heart attack. *I should really get going.* She began flapping her wings, slowly hovering in the air. Her body wobbled as she struggled to stay afloat. *Woah,* she murmured.

How do you work these things? She took a deep breath and focused on flapping at the same time, finding a rhythm not unlike her dances. Using her talons, she grabbed onto Bolo's shoulders and began

soaring outward. Pieces of the ceiling falling downward forced her to zigzag in numerous directions. *OW!* she shouted after making it into another room, falling out of the air. She looked behind her and noticed one of the Bone Worms had chomped down on her wings, taking some feathers along with it. *Stupid worm!* Shantae wanted to shout.

Her left wing ached as blood began to seep outward. *I need to get out of here now.* She picked Bolo up once more as she tried to not scream from the pain of moving the wing. Instead, she kept flapping her wings as she bit her lip. She managed to soar out of the building before it collapsed in on itself. She crashed into the grass in front of what used to be Dribble Fountain. A purple light enveloped her body as she let go of Bolo. Her fingers reappeared once more as she shed the many feathers that covered her body. The feathers, much like the monkey fur, dissipated into nothingness as the rest of her body returned to normal. Her claws were normal feet once more and her arms had their normal bone structure. Her clothing and jewelry returned to normal, as well.

"You okay, Bolo?" Shantae asked weakly, holding onto her bleeding arm. *Really wish that pain didn't transfer over,* she thought angrily.

"Oh, my head," he murmured, his head feeling like it was going to split itself in half. "It's all a blur. What happened?" he asked.

"A rock hit you in the head," Shantae stated. "And Risky got the stone when we weren't looking. She let us take care of that monster so she could get it while it was distracted," she said bitterly. "We're not going to let that happen again," she asserted, her voice taking on a more aggressive tone. "Bolo, where's the next stone?"

"I think Sky knows where it is," Bolo stated, rubbing his chin as he tried to remember what Mimic had told him. "Mimic each put us in charge of knowing where a stone is."

"But... that only makes three of you," Shantae panted, struggling to breathe. The blood continued to drip down her arm, further worrying Bolo. "If you, Sky, and Mimic each know where a stone is, who's the fourth? There are four stones, right?"

"Yeah, but that's not the point right now. We need to get you healed up before something worse happens," Bolo stated sternly.

Shantae looked at her wound and groaned. "You're right," she conceded with a sigh. "Let's get back to Water Town and heal up. Then I'll fly us to the next place we need to go."

"Wait... you have a plane?" Bolo asked, dumbfounded.

"No, I can turn into a bird," Shantae said, resisting the urge to facepalm herself.

"So, you can lay eggs?" Bolo surmised. "Do the eggs have mini-Shantaes inside them? Can you make an army of clones?" Sweat dripped from his brow as he pondered the ramifications of these concepts. "What if the clones cause an uprising and take over the planet? What if they call it Planet of the Shantaes? Shantae, whatever you do, do not lay an egg!" he demanded, grabbing onto her shoulders as his heart raced.

"I... what?" Shantae asked, astonished by Bolo's logic.

And so, the first dungeon is complete. Where will our heroes end up next? You'll find out soon enough.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6

Risky stood upon her ship, smiling while listening to the calm waters of the ocean brush against the hull. The stone she had held onto had been absorbed into the lamp, bringing herself one step closer to peace of mind. She noticed several of her Tinkerbats standing behind her, all of them bowing to her. She turned around and sighed. “You know, you don’t have to be so formal,” she told her men.

They realize that their leader will soon return, Jack told her, making her left eye twitch.

I’m their leader, Risky barked at him.

Have they ever bowed to you as they do for me?

Risky looked at the Tinkerbats, realizing that they were not even looking at her. Moreso, they were looking at the skull she wore. Risky looked into their eyes, hoping to find the slightest bit of respect they had for her. Instead, her irate expression simply sent a chill down their bony spines. All she could see was fear, making her even angrier. Risky clenched her fists as she growled, scaring the Tinkerbats off in a hurry.

Thought so, Jack retorted. *Like I’ve told you before. Respect is earned. Anyway, I need you to slow down the ship.*

Why? Risky demanded, becoming more and more vexed.

I want to tell Harmony the complete truth by the time I am free. The more time I have, the more likely I am able to do that.

Her again? Risky said with a snort. *Obsessed much, old man? If you hate those Genies so much, why didn't you kill her and take her powers?*

There is more to it than you know, Jack replied.

What, you got a heart now? Risky snarked.

I have always had one, Jack replied.

Could have fooled me, Risky replied. *And I thought you wanted to free yourself,* Risky pointed out. *If I just get you those stones sooner, you can spend as much time as you want with Harmony...* she replied, sarcastically waving her hands in the air when thinking of the half-Genie's name.

I've told you this before. I'm in no rush. And I need to spend more time with Harmony before I am free.

Why are you so obsessed with keeping her around? What has she ever done for you?

Ah. Is this a bit of jealousy I'm sensing?

Don't ignore the question, Risky demanded. *Why is she so important to you?*

She has a connection to someone I once knew, Jack explained. *It is... hard to explain. Let's just say that not* every *Genie I came across was a control freak. Some had a heart, and so do their children. Harmony trusts me and I would like to keep it that way.*

That's rich coming from the guy who wanted to attack a girl just for looking *like the woman who locked you away.*

I will admit my temper got the better of me there. All I could see in that moment was Ana.

One more thing, Risky added. *She trusts you because she doesn't know you. Not like I do. You're just lying to her like you did to me. Once she knows who you are, she'll run away and join that purple-haired runt...* Her eyesight became watery as she felt herself floating. She looked around her, seeing various fish pass by her. Her hat had floated off her head as the bones she was wearing peeled themselves off from her chest and waist. The bones formed the shape of a skull and teeth.

You don't know what you're talking about, Jack spoke through the skeleton, his voice seething with rage. *I have never lied to her and I never will.*

Risky attempted to speak, but couldn't. Even her thoughts were overwhelmed by the pressure the water was putting onto her lungs. Her breath was running out as she looked upward, hoping to find the water's surface. She swam upward, the last bits of her breath on the brink of escaping. Her fingertips touched the water, ready to make her escape when suddenly she felt wrap around her leg. She looked down to see a black, murky tentacle cutting off the blood circulation to her ankle. She tried kicking the tentacle away, but a new appendage shot up of nowhere, trapping her other leg in place. Before she could use her arms, two more tentacles coiled around her stomach, constricting her arms as she began sinking. She could not scream for water began filling up her lungs. The appendages began dragging her down, sealing her off from her one chance at living. The world around her grew darker as the water became a murky black.

After all these years, you still know nothing about me, Risky. And if you keep up this sad act, this fate will become a reality.

Risky's eyes opened, finding that her vision had tilted horizontally. She blinked in surprise, finding that she had curled into a fetal position. Only one aspect of the nightmare had transferred over to real life: the wetness in her eyes.

Harmony stood in front of the wooden house within Spider Forest. It was not that far from Emma's home, making Harmony a bit more optimistic she would see the chef girl again. *Is this the place you wanted to talk?* Harmony asked.

Yes, Jack stated. *I've unlocked the door for you.*

Harmony twisted the knob, opening the door. The cottage itself was not that big, having a small kitchen and dinner table compacted together. She walked through the kitchen, finding herself in the living room. She noticed a broken television to her right and couch that

was barely held together on her left. She kept moving forward, walking towards the door only a few feet away from her. She held the knob and noticed her hand was trembling slightly. *I've been here before, haven't I?* she asked.

Indeed, Jack admitted. *Serena viewed this place as one of her homes away from home.*

Harmony nodded as she opened the door. Inside this room was an old bed on her left, with faded red sheets that had dust on them. She rubbed the sheets, wiping away some of the dust. She noticed a crib off to the right of the bed. The wooden bars that held it together had faded in color. She walked over and noticed a small red sheet covered the crib's interior. Lying on top of the sheet was a small, plastic hammer. She picked it up and smiled as she wrapped her fingers around the handle.

A gift from Aaron, Jack explained. *He wanted you to grow up to become a warrior like he was.*

Harmony smiled as she held the toy close to her. Although faint, the sense of familiarity the hammer gave her was astonishing. *This would be a nice place to live,* Harmony murmured inside her thoughts. Something in the corner of her eye made her wince: spider webs decorating the walls. *After some sprucing up.* She put the toy back into the crib. *What happened to this place? I remember being here several hours ago. It was my parents' anniversary. But now, it's like it's been abandoned for years.*

That is going to take a lot of explaining to do, Jack admitted. *But we can start from the beginning if you'd like. Before that, there is something I want to show you,* Jack informed her, making her eyes perk up. *Look to your right.*

She craned her neck in the specified direction, stopping when she saw a picture frame hung to the wall with a nail and string. Her heart skipped a beat as she saw who was in the photo. She slowly stepped closer, her hand wobbling as her fingers rubbed against the photograph. Her vision began to blur as a sheet of water clouded her eyes.

There were three people in the photograph. A man wearing a white top-collar shirt and brown pants appeared to the side of the bed in the photo. *Your father was unusually formal for once,* Jack explained. *Your mother convinced him to change his look for a day.* Harmony chuckled, now remembering how her father typically dressed. A woman with long red hair and a blue gown was resting under the sheets of the bed. In her arms was that of an infant just born. Her face was that of a pout, contrasting with her mother's, who had an exhausted smile.

That's me, isn't it? Harmony asked.

It's from the day you were born, Jack replied, making Harmony smile.

Harmony wiped away her tears. *Are there any other family photos?*

I do not know.

Harmony went room by room, searching from top to bottom. But there were no other photos, and certainly not of the individual she was looking for. *Plink's not here anywhere.*

I am not entirely sure what the case is with Plink, Jack admitted. *Perhaps we'll figure it out in time.*

I need to know something. It may not help with finding Plink, but it's been on my mind a bit, Harmony replied. *How did my parents meet? I don't know if they ever told me, but I can't remember at the moment.*

That is a fascinating tale, Jack spoke with a laugh. *I only have an account from your mother, so I am relying on her words here.*

Harmony smirked. *You remember her telling you all of this?*

I do. There are some things I can never forget. Serena is one of them. From what she had told me, she and your father had met one day when she was visiting the human realm. While Serena was in a good mood around me, the same could not be said for one of the other Genies.

Why, did she hate this person? Harmony asked, having difficulty imagining her mother ever getting angry. Despite her faint memories, she could recall that her mother was typically understanding of Harmony and her woes.

Not initially, but she did get on Serena's nerves. Serena was the oldest of her generation and as such had a responsibility for making sure she kept the others in line. This one Genie was somewhat of an imbecile.

She couldn't have been that bad.

If there's one thing to be thankful for of this one, she is the reason your parents met, Jack conceded.

Harmony's eyes widened excitedly, sitting down on the bed. All she was missing was popcorn. *Tell me.*

As you wish.

A woman with red hair wrapped in a ponytail walked down the hallways of a pyramid. Her lips were curled into a perpetual smile as she looked around her. While the exterior was held together by dark blue bricks, the interior was coated in gold columns. The hallway the woman inhabited had its walls decked in various mirrors. Each mirror acted like a security camera for other dimensions. The mirrors were made of a glass that could only be penetrated through a strong force of magic and they stuck to the walls through a magical adhesive.

The woman wore a short, white tank top that exposed her midriff. She had white pants with cut-outs that exposed her hips as well as a purple underside. Her purple mojari shoes created echoes with every step she took. She wore her long red hair in a ponytail that still managed to reach down to her knees. Finally, like every Genie, she possessed pointed ears.

She looked across both walls, taking her daily report of what was going on. At least once every five minutes, a Genie had to report

about any dangerous activity they spotted in the mirrors. She had a small clipboard in her left arm and a pen in her right. She did not see any particular activity in one mirror, so she moved onto the next one. She repeated this cycle until she was nearly at the end of the hallway. She came across a blue spec on one of the mirrors. Although it was faint, it was a presence she still recognized. She walked over to the mirror and twisted one of the dials clockwise, zooming in on an energy signature. “Not again...” she murmured, recognizing the other person as her smile began to fade.

In the mirror was a woman of similar age, although this one had a remarkable tan and wore a blue dress and matching mojari shoes. Blue ribbons adorned her elbows as she wore a golden tiara with a sapphire that acted as a centerpiece. Her long purple hair was also in a ponytail and reached down to her knees. She was standing next to dozens of humans, blending in with the crowd as she watched a glorious battle from within a coliseum. To the side of her was a small portal, invisible to the naked eye, but not to the Genie’s eye. Unfortunately, invisible did not mean intangible. Anyone could enter the portal, even if they did not see it.

“Wait a minute,” the redhead realized, latching her fingers onto the mirror. She pulled the mirror down and sighed. A portal of identical size was glued to the wall. “Why does she do this?” she wondered aloud. She placed one foot into the portal as she stuck the mirror behind her back onto the wall. She then placed the rest of her body through the rest of the portal, taking her to the planet known as Earth.

She appeared behind a crowd that had been cheering as gladiators clashed in the arena. She hovered her hand in the air, her gesture making the portal behind her close. She was fortunate nobody could see her appear out of nowhere, as everyone was busy spectating the battle. She considered herself even more fortunate nobody had fallen through the portal by mistake. She tapped on the purple-haired woman’s shoulder, making the latter turn around.

This woman began chuckling nervously as she saw a tired look in the redhead’s eyes. “Hey Serena...”

“Ana, you can’t just leave portals open like that,” Serena informed

her.

“Whoops...” Ana murmured, tapping her fingers together nervously. “Sorry, I forgot.”

“Do you have a reason to be here?” Serena asked. “You know the Genies require an actual reason to visit these places. You can’t just be here whenever you want. Keeping those portals open might let something into our realm. Or damage the reality in this one.”

“I have a reason,” Ana insisted. “I was checking to make sure nothing gets too chaotic.”

“You say that while watching people try to kill one another in front of an audience,” Serena pointed out.

“Well, I’m making sure they *don’t* kill each other,” Ana said with a nervous chuckle.

Serena took a quick glance at the various gladiators battling it out in a free-for-all, noticing various warriors stained in blood and appearing to be unconscious. “Hmm...” she murmured. She noticed a young woman riding on top of a monstrous worm. The woman, looking to be early twenties, had bright orange hair that was kept in pigtails as well as pointed ears. She wore a green tank top and matching separated sleeves that were graced by yellow cuffs. Her white shorts also had yellow cuffs while her shoes were white heels with green stripes.

The worm resembled a centipede, having dozens of razor-sharp feet. The creature had coarse purple skin that was difficult to pierce with regular weaponry. It possessed a single yellow eyeball that rested within the center of its skull. Thousands of teeth rotated around its lips like a drill while its tail knocked out the remaining competitors. “How is that allowed?” Serena asked, baffled by the worm.

“I think they said anything goes,” Ana said with a shrug before returning her attention to the warriors.

“She doesn’t seem to be killing anyone at least,” Serena observed,

noticing a lack of killer instinct from the worm.

“Why are you even here?” Serena asked before noticing that the latter was blushing when looking at a certain warrior. He was an extremely muscular man with a bushy mustache and a shining bald head. He wore bright red harem pants with a golden sash and matching wristbands as well as brown mojari shoes. He did not wear a shirt, allowing his muscular physique to be placed on full display.

“You’re not so tough!” the man said with a thick, Russian accent. He dodged the worm swinging its tail before he had gotten his legs taken off. “Everyone has a limit, even giant worms!” he shouted.

Serena blinked in disbelief as she turned back to Ana. Ana noticed Serena’s glare. “What?” she asked, hoping the latter didn’t notice her blushing.

“Are you here just because of him?” Serena asked as calmly as she could, although she was still annoyed about the situation.

Ana chuckled nervously, tapping her fingers together. “I like to make sure he’s doing okay,” she admitted.

Serena sighed, hoping to hide her annoyance. She noticed that the worm was charging forward, its teeth spinning like a razor blade as it was on the verge of eating one of the warriors. She leaped down to the arena floor. While she was falling, an energy radiated throughout her body. Her arms danced to the energy bouncing around as her legs soon followed. Placing all of this energy into a burst set off with a single touch, she slammed her feet into the ground, sending a seismic shockwave around the arena. The ground shook the warriors as well as the worm. The worm fell over, landing on its back while the woman who rode the creature angrily leapt off. The coliseum itself shook as its conscious warriors and audience became dizzy.

Serena sighed as she caught her breath. She had never felt exhausted before when using her magic. Her powers also felt weaker than they normally were, making her question the side effects of being on Earth. She figured that her magic capacity had been cut in half thanks to her new environment, meaning she had

only one more attempt to use the Quake Dance again. She heard a person coughing, making her turn her attention to whoever was behind her. She saw a warrior in blue, shining armor lying on the ground.

“Are you okay?” she asked, holding out her hand. The man was rubbing his head when he noticed her hand in front of his face. The man had tan skin as well as scruffy blond hair and untrimmed facial hair. Given the dents and scrapes on his armor, it was obvious that the helmet he once wore had been knocked off. “Thanks,” he said, picking himself up.

“Why did they allow that thing in here?” Serena wondered aloud, looking back at the worm.

“The rule makers said our only objective is to win,” the man stated as he patted dust off his armor.

Serena sighed. “What even is the prize?” she asked. She had trouble believing any prize was worth giving up their life for.

“Your name engraved in the coliseum’s halls and a lifetime supply of gems,” the man stated.

“That’s it?” Serena asked, blinking in disbelief. “No amount of fame or money should be worth giving up your life for.”

“Maybe not your life, but I’ve got a mom I need to feed,” the man stated. “If I don’t win this, then...” His fists clenched as the thought of failure entered his brain. “...well, I’m just going to win.”

“Mom?” Serena asked. While the Genies were aware of what parenthood was thanks to the Earth's many cultures, they did not have that concept back at home.

“Wilbur!” a voice screamed, catching both of their attention. The orange-haired woman was horrified to watch her pet suffering, struggling to get up. “Get up, Wilbur! Please!” she pleaded, hoping her pet could still fight. She gritted her teeth as her eyes locked with Serena’s. “That was my pet, you freak!” she shouted. She noticed Serena’s clothing, recognizing the intricate designs in the material

as well as the pointed ears the latter had. “You’re one of those nutjob Genies, aren’t you?” she snapped loudly.

“It’s one of those mythical Genies, folks!” an announcer shouted upon hearing the woman’s outburst. The announcer’s statement was heard over a blaring megaphone on the sidelines that made the crowd begin cheering as they realized a once in a lifetime experience was in their midst. Rarely did a Genie show up on Earth, making the occasion even more special given that she was now a warrior in the coliseum.

This shift in attention only made the orange-haired woman angrier as the crowd focused adoration onto Serena. “You Genies are nothing but attention hogs!” she yelled, confusing Serena. She had never seen someone so averse towards Genies. Most people, from the records she had read of, seemed to love Genies and their mystical presence.

Wilbur, as the worm was called, began to pick himself up. “Wilbur! You’re okay!” the woman exclaimed, wrapping her arms around the gigantic worm. “Let’s teach that freak a lesson!” she demanded. The worm smiled as he lowered his head, allowing the woman to leap onto her pet. “Charge!” she exclaimed. “When she does that magic stuff again, jump!” she commanded.

“Great...” Serena murmured, watching Wilbur coming closer and closer. “We need a plan,” she stated.

“Aren’t you a Genie?” the armored warrior asked, recalling what the announcer had said. “Shouldn’t that worm be no problem?”

“My magic is weakened in this dimension,” Serena stated. “I think I’ve only got one more chance to finish him.”

“Maybe we can trap him,” the armored warrior suggested. He turned to the bald warrior nearby, the one Ana had been fawning over. “Karnov, can you trap that thing?”

“I’ve tried, but that worm will just jump over my attacks,” Karnov stated. He took notice of Serena’s presence. “Ah. A Genie is here. Truly a legendary battle will happen if you are here,” he declared.

“Do not disappoint me,” he said with an eager smile.

“Yeah, about that...” Serena said awkwardly. “I’m kind of running at half strength right now.”

Karnov blinked, unable to comprehend what he had just heard. “What?” he asked.

“Yeah. My magic works differently on Earth,” Serena admitted. “We need to think carefully...”

“Need a hand?” Ana shouted from the stands.

Karnov turned his neck to see Ana, his neck rotating one hundred and eighty degrees. “Ha ha!” he laughed. “Another Genie joins us!”

“You know it!” Ana shouted, sending him a wink.

Serena’s eyes shot open seeing this, astonished by the flexibility Karnov possessed in his neck. “What... is he?” she murmured.

Ana leapt down, performing a similar dance in the air to the one Serena did. This dance had her focus her energy in her legs, waving them back and forth in the air. She concentrated the energy as her hips danced to the rhythm started by her legs.

“Why is she dancing?” the armored warrior questioned.

“Don't you know anything?” Karnov replied, shaking his head. “That's how they do their magic. It's in the books.”

“That seems silly,” the armored warrior said.

Ana moved the energy back to her legs once more and held her arm into the arm, releasing the energy from her body. A purple light consumed her body, creating a blinding aura that forced the woman riding Wilbur to fall off her pet. “I can’t see!” the woman screamed, rubbing her eyes. Unlike the other warriors, she was unable to shield her eyes in time. The light eventually cleared, revealing an entirely new creature. No longer was the Genie’s human-like appearance present. Instead, what stood in place was a blue-furred wolf. This creature stood on all fours and possessed icicle spikes on its back.

The creature had a black snout and blue eyes, albeit connected to black sclera. Its claws were made of icicles as well. A golden tiara with a sapphire as a centerpiece appeared on the wolf's head. It growled as it kicked his hind legs back, preparing a charge.

"Wait," Serena commanded, making the wolf bark in annoyance. "We need a plan to beat that worm." She rubbed her chin quickly as she thought of a solution. "Karnov, you can breathe fire, right?"

Karnov nodded. "Nobody breathes it better than I do," he stated confidently.

"And Ana's wolf form can lay icicles in the ground," Serena stated, saying it more as a reminder to herself than anything.

"I've got a hammer that can help us out," the armored warrior offered, pulling out a tiny silver hammer.

"Uh..." Serena murmured, unsure whether or not the warrior was joking. "I don't that's big enough, uh..."

"Aaron," the warrior stated. "And trust me, it gets bigger." He wrapped his fingers around the handle, watching as the hammer grew to be a size larger than his head.

"How... do you hold that?" Serena asked, pointing to the massive hammer. Unless Aaron had undergone massive training, the hammer should have made him fall over from the weight alone. "And you think *dancing* is silly?"

Aaron shrugged. "I just do," he replied. "And a hammer is more reliable than a dance. You wanted a plan, right? We can use this to send you flying and stomp that worm like you did the ground earlier."

"That's pretty smart," Serena murmured, almost jealous of Aaron's plan. She turned to Karnov and Ana. "Karnov, use that fire of yours to guide it this way. Ana, use your icicles to slow it down." The duo nodded simultaneously.

"Is the hammer going to fall over if I stand on it?" Serena asked.

"Not if I'm being nice," Aaron joked.

“Hilarious,” Serena said with a small chuckle.

Wilbur was rubbing its head against the woman, hoping that his owner was alright.

“I’m fine,” she told him with a smile. “Thanks, Wilbur.” The creature nodded as she leaped back on top of his head. “Charge!” she exclaimed, pointing in Serena’s direction.

“On the count of three,” Serena told Aaron as she leaped onto the face of his hammer. “One...” She began waving her arms, letting the energy bounce back and forth between her hips. Karnov and Ana charged towards Wilbur with the former breathing a ring of fire around the worm’s path while Ana ran to the right of the worm. “Two...”

The woman on top merely laughed at Karnov. “That ain’t going work, hothead,” she taunted. Wilbur pulled himself back and leaped over the fire ring. As soon as he landed, he cried out in pain, startling the woman on top. “Wilbur! What's wrong?” she asked her pet, looking over his head. Then, she noticed the source of his pain: icicles lodged in his skin. Even with the rough exterior that Wilbur possessed, the icicles still harmed the giant. The woman gritted her teeth as she roared.

“Three!” Serena shouted as Aaron flung her towards Wilbur. The woman’s eyes widened in terror as sweat dripped down her cheeks. Putting the energy she had concentrated into her right fist, a red aura began to form around Serena. The aura that leaked out of her body floated up to her fist and wrapped itself around her knuckles.

“Please don’t...” the woman pleaded.

Serena grinded her knuckles into Wilbur’s chest, making the monster scream as his body trembled. The sensation was akin to having an earthquake occur inside his own body. The worm collapsed once more, forcing the woman to leap off her pet. “Wilbur!” she screamed, watching her pet’s eye twitch before shutting. “No no no no,” she murmured, shaking Wilbur. She held onto the slim hope that her pet would wake up.

Serena walked up to her, trying her best not to look exhausted from the power drain she had just suffered. “It’s over,” she told the woman.

“You killed my pet!” the woman shouted.

“No!” Serena shouted, horrified by such a suggestion. “I held back. He’s only unconscious.”

The woman looked back at her pet, holding her ear to the creature’s heart. She could still hear it beating, prompting a brief sigh of relief. Serena turned around and began walking back to her allies.

A bright light consumed the coliseum once more, restoring Ana to her true form. The fur on her skin shedded, returning to its normal tanned self. Her claws shrank to the size of normal fingers. Light particles aligned together, recreating her dress and shoes. Her hair sprouted from her head, putting her ponytail back in place. “That’s better,” she commented with an exhausted chuckle.

“Wait, where are you going?” the woman asked in Serena’s direction.

“It’s over,” Serena stated, turning back around. “I don’t want to fight anymore.”

“Don’t you know the rules?” the woman snapped. “It’s not over until the opponent is dead.”

Serena looked back at Ana, who gave an awkward shrug as she tried to look away. Serena returned her gaze to the woman. “I don’t kill my opponents,” she stated, almost saying that more to herself than the woman. “And you don’t either, it seems.”

“I just knock them out,” the woman stated bitterly. “I don’t maim them like you do. You Genies think you can just walk all over us, don’t you?” she snapped. “Your antiquated sense of morality is a joke.”

“Hey, what’s wrong with Genies?” Ana asked, looking towards the woman. “Why do you hate us so much?”

The woman laughed. “Why shouldn’t I hate you?” she replied.

“Everyone treats you like gods! People will do anything for you because you put on a nice show for them and act like nothing can hurt you.” She smiled as she noticed a blue liquid oozing from Serena’s knuckles. “But you can bleed, just like the rest of us.” Serena looked down at her hand, startled by the blood leaking from the wound. She had never imagined this dimension could make her so weak. “You freaks aren’t that great,” the woman continued. “One day, everyone will see you all for the glory hogs you are. People who had to work for what they have will finally be remembered and the Genies will be nothing but a reminder to not put freaks onto pedestals!”

“I don’t even know who you are,” Serena murmured, perplexed by this woman’s rant.

“I’m Holly Lingerbean,” the woman stated. She pulled her left hand back, curling her fingers into a fist. “And you *will* remember my name!” she shouted, rocketing a punch towards Serena’s face.

Serena shut her eyes as she used the remaining power she had in her fist to push Holly back with an open palm. The push sent Holly crashing into a wall on Serena’s left. Bricks landed on top of her body as she struggled to move. She slowly picked herself up. Her body was quivering as blood dripped down her face. “Is that... all you... got?” she said, taking a step forward. She tried to take one more, but collapsed onto her knees before landing on the ground.

“Poor Hope,” Ana stated. “I feel like she wouldn’t hate us so much if she got to know us.”

“Maybe...” Serena agreed. “But why would she enter a death match not to kill anyone?” She looked back at her bloody hand. The shoes she wore had a magical seal that cushioned any impacts from her earthquakes, whereas her hands had no protection whatsoever. Even still, she couldn’t believe that she was bleeding. If a warrior as weak as the worm made her bleed, she didn’t want to imagine what would happen should she have faced a stronger opponent.

“Good work, everyone,” Karnov said to the team.

“You know, there’s still that rule in place that says we have to fight to

the death," Aaron pointed out.

"Maybe I can get them to change it," Serena suggested. "Hey!" she shouted to the announcer with a megaphone. "Do you mind changing it so people just have to concede or get knocked out to lose? I really don't want people dying here. And maybe just give the rewards to these two guys!" she said, pointing to Karnov and Aaron.

"What?" Karnov asked in disbelief. "But the fight isn't over. There hasn't been a victor."

"Yeah. I wanted to earn this victory," Aaron stated. "I don't want to have it handed to me."

"Ok," Serena groaned. "On second thought, just have these two fight until there's a winner!"

"Sure!" the announcer shouted. "Anything for you nice Genies! No more killing!" The crowd began cheering for the Genies, although Serena doubted their sincerity.

Ana chuckled as she held her arms behind her back. "It feels good to be loved."

"Yeah..." Serena murmured, thinking back to what Holly had been saying. The woman had said that people would do anything for the Genies, and here was the announcer bending over backwards to please them. She couldn't imagine even half of these people showing up to these events if the offer to view a death match was no longer on the table. "Wait," she realized, looking at Karnov and Aaron. "You guys went in expecting to kill each other."

They both nodded. "Yeah," they said simultaneously.

"Aren't you two friends?" Serena asked, completely baffled by how willingly they were to fight each other to death.

"Yeah," they said again.

"And you were both willing to kill each other... just to win?"

The duo looked at each other before giving their answer. "Yeah."

“I am *so* confused,” Serena murmured.

“In a fight to the death, you need to win,” Karnov replied. “Aaron and I don’t take it personally if we’re trying to kill each other.”

“Yeah, we fight each other all the time,” Aaron agreed. “If one of us dies, we’ll give the other guy a nice funeral. And give half of what money we have to his family. That's just how our families are.”

Serena rubbed her temples as she began to comprehend what she was hearing.

Ana tiptoed next to Karnov. “ *Soooo...* ” she began. “You doing anything this weekend?”

“Yes. Training,” Karnov answered proudly.

“Mind if I join you?” Ana asked, sending him another wink.

“If you can bring a challenge, then you can join us!” Karnov exclaimed.

“Us?” Serena questioned.

“Karnov and I train every weekend together,” Aaron explained. “Just a typical sparring match.”

“Okay...” Serena murmured. She looked to see Ana was still fawning over Karnov’s muscular physique, making Serena groan. She was certain that more than five minutes had passed during this time period, meaning that her report was incomplete and that the person’s next report, Ana’s, was also incomplete. “Ana, we need to get going.”

“What?” Ana asked.

“We have a job to do,” Serena pointed out. “You made both of us miss ours.”

“Sorry,” Ana apologized. “I can do your report tomorrow to make up for it!”

“You’d better,” Serena said with a smile, opening a portal behind her.

“Later Karnov,” Ana said, blowing a kiss in his direction. She leaped into the portal, disappearing into the Genie Realm.

“Where did she go?” Karnov asked.

“Oh right,” Serena realized. Only Genies could see the portal, so to somebody like Karnov, Ana had jumped into nothing and disappeared. “It’s just a portal only Genies can see,” she explained.

“You Genies are a strange bunch,” Karnov observed.

“That makes two of us,” Serena replied. “I’ll let you two get back to your match. And please don’t die in case Ana comes back which... she probably will.”

“There’s no getting rid of that Genie,” Karnov observed with a laugh. “I see her all the time, blowing kisses at me like we’re married or something. I didn’t know she was a Genie until today.”

“Guess you got your own cheerleader, buddy,” Aaron joked, elbowing him with a laugh. He turned to Serena. “What about you? Are you ever coming back?”

“Probably to keep Ana in check,” Serena replied.

“We wouldn’t mind if you came back,” Aaron stated. “We could always use another fighter to spar with.”

“I don’t like fighting honestly,” she admitted. “I only train because I need to. It’s not a game for me.”

Aaron tapped his chin as he considered his words. “You said your magic is weaker here, right?”

Serena nodded. “Yes.”

“Maybe you could train with us sometime so it won’t be as weak the next time you have to fight here,” Aaron suggested.

“I suppose I could,” Serena said with a small chuckle as she began entering the portal.

“You know, I never did learn your name,” Aaron pointed out.

The Genie looked back at Aaron, her lips slowly curling into a smile. “Serena.”

Harmony was giggling as Jack concluded the story. *He already had a thing for Mom, didn’t he?* she asked.

I cannot say one way or the other, Jack replied.

So Ana is Shantae’s mother, right? Harmony assumed.

If you mean the purple-haired half-Genie you saw earlier, then yes.

That makes sense. Shantae seems kind of like her mother, Harmony observed. *They’re both a bit silly, but care about their friends.*

Yes, Ana was an interesting... one to say the least, Jack agreed. *Her powers are different from your mother’s. Some of the transformations Ana used did not drain any of her magic, whereas others did.*

So can all Genies pass down their abilities to their children? Harmony assumed. *I got that Quake Dance from Mom.*

Hard to say, Jack admitted. *You were the first one to have actual parents. Prior to you, Genies had never been mothers before. Genies are typically born in the Magical Pyramid in the center of the Genie Realm. They are created by the magic that flows through the Genie Realm. Genies are born as adults and do not have childhoods like humans do.*

It's weird. I remember parts of my childhood, but I can't piece it all together, Harmony observed with a hint of sorrow infiltrating her thoughts. *So Mom missed out on her childhood, huh?* Harmony observed with a hint of sorrow infiltrating her thoughts. She looked

down to see the dilapidated wooden floor that occupied the room, wanting to think about anything else besides the current topic.

Even if she's gone, she still lives on in you, Harmony. You've inherited her abilities, have you not?

Harmony picked her head up and nodded. *And my dad's,* she pointed out. *His hammer.*

That hammer is constructed by the magic you use, Jack explained. *Magic often takes the shape of whatever is in your head at the moment of the usage.*

Yeah, Harmony agreed. *Hey, who do you think I'm more like? My mom or my dad?*

I'm not entirely certain, he admitted. *Your father could be very hard headed, such as when he could not accept that victory being given to him.*

I kind of understand what he was getting at, Harmony replied. *If you won without your own efforts, what's the point of trying at all if it's just handed to you?*

I suppose you're more like him than I realized, Jack observed, making Harmony giggle.

I wonder who Plink was more like, Harmony questioned.

That is a good question, Jack agreed.

Harmony let out a sigh. *Thank you for telling me all of this,* she stated. She could faintly remember her mother and father playfully bickering with one another while explaining their first meeting to a young Harmony. She closed her eyes. While she couldn't visualize Jack, she imagined a man of extreme virtue behind the invisible curtain. *But, I need to know. Why are you so nice to me? I still don't remember you at all. And I don't remember my parents ever mentioning you.*

I owe it all to your mother, Jack replied. *She was the one who freed me from my prison the first time.*

What kind of prison was it? Harmony asked.

We'll get to that part of the story soon enough, Jack replied.

Ok, Harmony said. *Who freed you the second time?*

That has yet to happen, Jack stated. *There are four stones that are connected to my freedom.*

Are those the Elemental Stones Shantae was talking about? She seemed worried that that pirate was going to use them to destroy stuff.

The pirate won't use them for that, Jack assured her. *They were built as seals to contain me. Magic such as that can only be neutralized through certain methods.*

Why were you even locked up? Harmony asked.

I showed a group of people who they truly were... and they did not respond in kind.

Harmony began to think of her next question, but hesitated to ask. She was certain she already knew the answer. *Who... locked you up?*

A group of control freaks, Jack explained. *Your mother was part of this group, but she eventually saw through their flaws.* Harmony's blood ran cold, knowing full well what he was about to say. *The Genies imprisoned me. All because I told them the truth.*

Chapter 7

Chapter 7

Sorry it took so long to get this chapter out. It's been a busy year and I've been stuck with writer's block a lot of the time. I hope this somewhat makes up for it.

“You’re... telling me a lot here,” Harmony said aloud, carefully considering her words. “A lot more than I expected.”

Yes, it is a lot to take in, isn’t it? Jack agreed with a small chuckle. *Well, you wanted to learn more about the past, did you not?*

Yes. I just... wasn’t sure what to expect, Harmony admitted. She could not recall her parents informing her that much about her Genie lineage.

That’s alright, Jack replied. *Perhaps it would be a good time to rest. We can discuss it more tomorrow if you like.*

Harmony looked out the window to her left. The sun had set some time ago and she felt exhausted. Even more so with this newfound knowledge. *I need to know something. What happened to all the Genies?*

We'll get to that. It is a long story and it requires many details, Jack explained. *I much prefer to tell a story from beginning to end. It feels more cohesive to me.*

Harmony hesitated for a moment before she communicated her thoughts. *Are there any left?*

Beyond the remaining half-Genies in this world, I believe there are some still left in the Genie Realm, Jack answered.

You said you'd never lie to me, right?

I made a promise that I never would, he ensured her.

Harmony took a deep breath. *I need to know. Did you kill the rest of the Genies?* The room became silent. She waited for a response, wincing when she heard nothing back. *When I woke up, I could see something horrible. And then, it was gone. But I know it had to do with the Genies.*

She could hear a tired sigh. *That question is not something that can be answered so easily with a simple yes or no. Rest soundly tonight and you will have all the answers you seek soon enough.*

Harmony plopped down onto the bed's pillow. *I just... don't know what to say.*

I know this seems difficult, but when all is said and done, I hope you can still trust me, Jack stated. Harmony held her finger over her lips, contemplating Jack's words. *You may not trust me now, but perhaps this knowledge will convince you to, even if temporarily. There is an unbreakable magic barrier between us that I created. I cannot read your thoughts unless you want me to hear them. Everything you wish to keep private is safe from me.*

Why would you do that? Why me specifically? Harmony questioned.

I saw a purity in you that had not yet been tainted by the Genies. It reminded me of your mother's heart. So, I bestowed that upon you and your mother as a sign of my trust.

What about my father?

He was less trustworthy, Jack said with a laugh. *We once played a game of cards together and he kept trying to look at my hand.*

Harmony snorted. *Maybe he's alright,* she thought to herself. *But even still, as nice as he's been, I need to be prepared for the worst.* She let out a yawn. *Let's talk more tomorrow,* she suggested, resting her head on her pillow while sneaking under the covers.

As you wish.

An exhausted Bolo panted, carrying an exhausted Shantae on his back while struggling to stand himself. They had finally made their way back into Water Town and it had become dark out. “Thanks,” Shantae murmured. They entered Bolo’s gazebo, where Bolo had carried her into his bedroom. He gently placed her onto his wooden bed, where she sat on top of his covers. She let out a yawn, struggling to stay awake.

“Let me go buy the potions,” he suggested, walking out of the room. He exited the building and headed into the shop across the street. There, he found a merchant selling healing potions.

“Ah, Bolo!” the merchant spoke eagerly, throwing his hands into the air. “My favorite customer returns! What can I do for you?”

“I need some potions for my friend,” Bolo stated.

“Ah, I have just the deal for you,” the merchant stated, holding up a crate full of potions. “They’re on sale tonight. Forty gems for two of them.”

“Wait, that’s the same price I got for three of them the other day,” Bolo pointed out.

“Eh, times are hard as you know,” the shopkeeper stated with a shrug. “And it’s still cheaper than if I only sold you two of them separately. I think that’s quite a steal.”

“Well, you do have a point,” Bolo conceded, taking out some gems from his wallet and handing them over. “Give me eight of them.”

“An amazing choice, Bolo!” the merchant exclaimed, tucking the gems into a register behind his desk. “You keep me in business more than anybody else.”

“Always happy to help,” Bolo said with a smile, placing the potions into his pocket while walking out of the store. He then realized how much he had spent thanks to this new *deal*... “Wait a minute…” He spun around to see a ‘Closed’ sign on the shop’s door. “Why do I keep doing that?” he wondered, remembering that this was not the

first time he had been scammed. He sighed, returning to the gazebo, where Shantae was on the verge of falling to sleep. “Here,” he said, handing the potion to her. Her eyelids were practically glued shut. She drank the potion sip by sip until there was nothing left. In the meantime, Bolo drank his own potion. Shantae’s bloody wounds had sealed up, her body no longer aching like it had been. Bolo’s wounds had healed too, removing his throbbing headache in the process.

“Thanks,” Shantae said, a small smile forming. She shook the empty vial. “What do they put into these things?”

Bolo shrugged. “No idea. The guy closed for the night as soon as I walked out.”

Shantae blinked, realizing what had happened. “Bolo... how much did you spend?”

“Uh... one hundred sixty gems?” he assumed.

Shantae sighed. “You got scammed again, didn’t you?”

“Yeah... ” Bolo agreed quietly.

“We’ll focus on that later,” Shantae replied. “Right now, we need to focus on the next stone.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Bolo said solemnly. “Maybe we should wait a bit.”

“Bolo... we can’t stop unless... it’s absolutely necessary,” she murmured, almost dozing off.

“I know, but it’s late and you barely know anything about your powers,” he pointed out. “Shouldn’t we have you test out your powers rather than basing our luck on chance? We don’t even know what you can really do yet.”

“Maybe,” Shantae said groggily. “But what if Sky... gets horrified by that thing that scared us?” she asked, yawning in between her sentence.

“Maybe I can go on ahead and find her so that doesn’t happen. While you can go find that other girl Mimic was talking to.”

“What if something happens to you?” Shantae asked worriedly. “You can’t touch the stones.”

“I’ll be fine,” Bolo assured her. “And when have I ever gotten myself into trouble?” Shantae’s eyes fluttered in confusion. “Good point,” he conceded.

“If I go find that girl, what are you going to do once you find Sky?” Shantae asked.

“Stop Risky before she gets her hands on the next stone,” Bolo stated. “You can find the person who can help find the next stone. She can probably help you train your powers,” he said, patting her on the shoulder. “She also knows about two of the stones,” he explained. “At least... that’s what Mimic told me.”

Shantae’s mind flashed back to Risky’s warning. “Hey Bolo, if it came down to it, do you think Mimic would save the stones over us?”

Bolo scratched his head. “I never really thought about it,” he admitted. “I hope not.”

Shantae sighed. “Risky’s getting into my head,” she murmured. She let out a groan. “I get that she wants that thing out of her head, but she’ll release a monster that will kill everyone,” she winced. “I don’t blame her for why she’s doing this, but I can’t let her win, right?” she asked Bolo.

Her friend gave a confused shrug. “I don’t think too much about these things,” he admitted. “It’s easier on my head. But I get it.”

Shantae looked into Bolo’s eyes. “Tell me about that other person. Who is she?”

“Oh, um, Mimic didn’t tell me that much about her,” Bolo admitted, scratching his chin. “I only heard her voice and ran to tell Sky.”

“What?” Shantae asked, flabbergasted.

“Yeah, I’ve never met her and I don’t think Sky has either,” Bolo stated. “I hope not anyway.”

“Wait, why?” Shantae questioned.

“Well, she’s a zombie...” Bolo said sheepishly.

“A zombie?” Shantae asked, completely baffled by what she was hearing. “Aren’t zombies braindead and are always eating our brains?”

“Mimic said she wasn’t braindead, or brain-eating,” Bolo said, trying to recall the details. “She’s kind of... human, like us.”

“Then how is she a zombie?”

Bolo shrugged. “I’m... not sure. Mimic said her name is Rottytops.”

“Wait, why does Mimic not want Sky to know she’s a zombie?”

“Uh, he didn’t say,” Bolo admitted. “He just said not to tell her until necessary.”

“What kind of logic is that?” Shantae questioned. *What is Mimic hiding?* she wondered. “And how am I supposed to find her?”

“That’s the funny part,” Bolo said with a nervous chuckle. “I... don’t know.”

“That’s... not funny,” Shantae pointed out.

“Mimic said she was part of something called the Zombie Caravan,” Bolo recalled. “I've seen their caravan in Water Town sometimes, but they’re always travelling.”

“How am I supposed to find her?” Shantae asked.

Bolo shrugged. “Maybe fly above Water Town tomorrow and hope you get lucky?”

“That’s... helpful,” Shantae sighed, plopping her head down on the bed’s pillow. She shut her eyes, slowly drifting off into dreamland.

Bolo yawned, heading into the kitchen of his gazebo. From his fridge, he found some bacon to munch on. He finished it before returning to the bedroom to find Shantae sound asleep. He slowly crept out of the building, making sure not to attract any attention to himself. *Need a head start on Risky before she can get to Sky,* he thought, racing out of Water Town. He zoomed through the frigid night, beginning to regret his decision to wear sandals and shorts on a regular basis.

A young woman with blonde hair and purple pajamas snored in her bed, blissfully dreaming away. A doorbell rang, making her eyes snap open. She crept out of her bed and gently rustled the fluffy bed on the ground next to her own. “Wrench,” she whispered, causing the bird inside to wake up. The bird was a cross between a wren and a finch and had purple fur everywhere except his wings, which were blue. “We have an intruder. You know the plan.” The young woman, Sky, tiptoed out of her bedroom and towards the front door. She pulled the door open, but hid behind the door as it opened. Wrench soared down from above, pecking the intruder’s skull relentlessly.

“Ah! Sky, it’s me!” the voice shouted, swatting unsuccessfully at Wrench.

Sky’s ears perked up, recognizing the voice immediately. “Wrench! Stop! It’s Bolo!”

Wrench ceased his attack to heed Sky’s words... and then began pecking Bolo even harder. Sky groaned, walking over to shoo Wrench away from Bolo’s head. “Thanks...” Bolo said, holding onto his throbbing head.

“Why are you here so late?” Sky asked with a yawn. She was not even mad, just exhausted.

“Sorry, I thought you were a night owl,” Bolo said sheepishly.

“Not funny,” Sky murmured, rubbing her sleepy eye.

“What isn’t?” Bolo questioned.

“I... ugh...” Sky groaned, realizing Bolo’s ignorance was genuine. “Let me get some coffee,” she yawned, heading into her kitchen and turning the lights on. In a matter of minutes, her coffee was done and she was taking the occasional sip here and there. “So why are you here?”

“Funny story,” Bolo began, faking a smile.

“The suspense is *killing* me,” Sky replied.

“Remember those stones Mimic told us about?” Bolo asked.

Sky’s expression turned serious. “This isn’t funny, is it?” she asked.

“No...” Bolo murmured. “Some pirate lady named Risky is after them.”

Sky sighed, putting down her coffee mug. “Has Shantae been filled in?”

“Yes.”

Sky let out a breath of relief. “Good, that saves time. Where is she?”

“Sleeping,” Bolo stated. “I told her to visit the other person who knows about the stones tomorrow.”

“Who is this other person? Mimic never told me anything about them,” Sky questioned, crossing her arms.

“Me neither,” Bolo said, trying not to look Sky in the eyes. “I just know they’re going to help Shantae get the other two stones.”

“Shantae already got ahold of a stone?” Sky asked, cautiously optimistic.

“No... Risky took it before we did,” Bolo said awkwardly.

“We can still stop her from getting the next one,” Sky assured him. “I know where to find it. All we need is some help from Wrench here...”

Her bird perched itself on her shoulder, rubbing his head against her. “What do you say, Wrench?”

Wrench squawked a certain message to Sky, changing her expression to something far less pleasant. “What do you mean you want a raise? You don’t get paid,” Sky stated, somewhat vexxed. “Fine, I’ll get you that fancy bird seed,” she complained. “But you need to work for it.” Wrench nodded, once again rubbing his head against her. Sky chuckled, scratching the back of Wrench’s head. She finished what remained of her coffee and placed the mug down onto the kitchen table. “How far behind are we with the pirate?” Sky asked, looking toward Bolo.

“I don’t know. That’s why I wanted to get your help as quickly as possible,” Bolo stated. “Shantae’s hopefully going to be training her new powers tomorrow in the meantime.”

“She has more powers?” Sky questioned, her eyes opening in surprise. “She’s only had the hair whip before.”

“Yeah, now she can transform into animals,” Bolo explained. “She can turn into a monkey and a bird...” he said, remembering what had happened and what Shantae had told him.

“Well, there goes any unique qualities I can bring to the team,” Sky joked weakly, trying to find the situation more humorous than disappointing.

“Well, I’m sure Wrench can fly better than she can,” Bolo insisted, hoping to boost her spirits. “You said he has some kind of special skill, right?”

Sky nodded. “He can fly several people at once.”

Bolo scratched his chin. “How does he do that? He’s so tiny.”

Sky smirked. “Wrench, do your stuff.” Wrench nodded, flying off her shoulder. Wrench’s body began taking up more space, his skeleton growing in size while the rest of his body expanded to match. His body accidentally pushed over the kitchen table, although Sky managed to catch her empty coffee mug before it smashed into the

ground. His claws stomped against the ground, causing the house to shake. Wrench's head was only inches away from the ceiling, making Bolo's jaw drop. "Does that answer your question?" Sky asked, crossing her arms contently.

"...Yeah."

The next day, Shantae's eyes creaked open slowly. As she pulled her head up, she noticed there was not one other soul in the building. "Bolo..." she groaned, realizing what he had done. She held onto her shoulders, sighing. "Please be okay." She pulled herself out of bed and made her way into the kitchen. She noticed her phone battery had died, making her sigh. She tried to maintain her compose, searching through Bolo's pantry and finding a cinnamon roll hidden below some other snacks. *He won't mind if it's missing, right?* she convinced herself, shoving the bun into her mouth. *I need to find that zombie. But I don't even know where to look. Maybe if I attract her attention, somehow? What could get the attention of a zombie that isn't brain dead and doesn't eat brains?*

She walked out of Bolo's gazebo, pondering potential solutions. *Bolo said she's sometimes in Water Town, but what would a zombie like this want? It would have to be something that's as ridiculous as she is. Something that only makes sense to her. But what is as ridiculous as a zombie with a brain and doesn't want to eat brains?*

She wiped the sweat off her brow, noticing the scalding hot weather preying upon her. *I could use some water. Wait a minute... that's it! If a regular person would drink cold water in this heat, a backwards zombie would drink hot coffee!* She paused, taking her entire thought process into consideration. *Great. Now I sound like Bolo. Well, he is Water Town's guardian. He must have convinced somebody to sell something as stupid as that in town.*

She walked through town, hoping to find any shops or stands that sold drinks. As she passed by various stands, she noticed one with a young woman slightly older than her. This person had green skin along with choppy hair that had a darker shade of green to it. To keep her hair from becoming too messy, she wore a yellow

headband to keep it in place. She wore navy blue shorts, white skull-like earrings, and brown boots. On her left arm and right leg were stitches. In her right hand was a plastic cup of coffee with a lid on it. For whatever reason, she was swinging her body around as if she was dancing to a song and she was the only one who could hear it.

Shantae slowly walked up to the young woman and tapped her on the shoulder. “Are you Rottytops?” Shantae asked.

The young woman turned around and shook her head. “‘Fraid not. I’m Goodtime. First name: Havea.”

“Oh, sorry,” Shantae apologized, beginning to leave. “Hey... wait a minute!” She spun around to see the zombie girl laughing.

“Gotcha!” she said between giggles. “You can just call me Rotty. My brothers and anyone I consider a friend can call me that.”

“Brothers?” Shantae questioned, wondering how that situation came to be. “Wait, you think I’m your friend? I just met you.”

“Then you’ve made a good first impression, snack cakes,” Rotty replied, pointing in her direction.

“Snack cakes?” Shantae asked, taking a step back. “You’re... not going to eat me, right?”

“Depends on whether or not I skipped breakfast,” Rotty replied with a smirk, making Shantae tense up. “Relax. I don’t eat people.” This made Shantae loosen up a bit. “I just call people whatever comes to mind.” She held out her left hand. “Put ‘er there!”

Although reluctant at first, Shantae shook Rotty’s head. That was when she felt her own hand become a bit heavier. She looked down to see that she was literally holding the zombie’s arm in her hand while her shoulder had disconnected from it. “What the?!” Shantae shrieked, dropping the arm. Rotty snatched the arm before it could hit the ground, reattaching it as if it were a toy. “Not funny,” Shantae grumbled.

“Guess we can’t all be as *humerus* as I am,” Rotty joked, but received no response other than a glare. “Wow, tough crowd.”

Shantae sighed. “Let’s focus, here,” she said, trying not to become any more vexed than she already was. “My uncle said you know about the Elemental Stones.”

“Uncle?” Rotty asked. “Honestly, I don’t even know who you are.”

“I’m Shantae,” the half-Genie explained. “My uncle told you about the Elemental Stones...”

“Oh, those!” Rotty realized. “I sorta forgot about them. It’s been about a while since he told me.”

“How did he find you, anyway?” Shantae questioned.

“He found me and my brothers one day and said he had a machine that detected a bunch of magic coming from us. That might be why I’m not a rotting corpse like most zombies. Mimic said I had more magic in me than my brothers did. He also thought I’d be useful for keeping his stones safe.”

“Yeah, you don’t seem to be mindless like the rest of them,” Shantae observed. “How do you keep your mind from falling apart?”

Rotty grinned. “One word. Coffee.”

“...What?”

Chapter 8

Chapter 8

“How does coffee keep you sane?” Shantae questioned.

“I don’t know,” Rotty said with a shrug before she took another sip. “It’s kinda like gravity. I don’t know why it happens. It just does.”

“And what happens if you don’t have coffee?” Shantae asked.

“Depends,” Rotty said, finishing her drink. She crushed the paper cup between her hands and tossed it behind her, landing in the trash can next to the shop. “Give it a week and my brain kinda fogs up, I don’t really know what I’m doing at that point,” she said, twirling her finger above her head. “I’ve never really let it go past a week, so I don’t know how much worse it can get.”

“Do you always get your coffee here?”

“Wherever I can find it, but this place usually. I found it about a month ago. Pretty laid-back. Nice people mostly, but some are scammers.”

“Yeah, you can say that again,” Shantae agreed. “I’m surprised Bolo’s never seen you before.”

“Hm?” Rotty asked.

“Bolo, he’s Water Town’s guardian,” Shantae explained. “He’s got blue spiky hair.”

“Oh, Hedgehog?” Rotty guessed with a grin.

“Hedgehog?” Shantae asked.

“That’s just what I call him. I’m usually gone before he can actually see me though.”

“Do you come up with nicknames for everyone?” Shantae asked,

somewhat vexed by Rotty's sense of creativity.

"Only when it comes to me," Rotty answered. "Why, did you want a new one?"

"No," Shantae said, becoming a bit more vexed than she had been. "I don't even like the one you gave me."

"Oh," Rotty murmured, her arms dropping from the back of her head. "Sorry. Didn't realize. Shantae it is."

Shantae sighed a breath of relief. "Thank you."

"How'd your parents come up with that name?" Rotty asked.

"I should be asking you that," Shantae snickered.

"Well, this isn't the name I was born with," Rotty replied.

"Oh," Shantae realized. "You changed it or something?"

"More like I forgot it and had to come up with a new one."

"Huh?"

"Well, I wasn't born a zombie," Rotty pointed out. "I've only been a zombie for like a year."

"So, you're like a baby?" Shantae asked, becoming confused.

Rotty shook her head. "Nah, I'm nineteen. Well, twenty, I guess. It's complicated." Rotty noticed Shantae's expression had become completely perplexed. "Yeah, it doesn't make much sense. I don't really remember my past too much."

"Amnesia?"

"Maybe? I just remember waking up one day on an island. Me and my brothers were all green and stuff, but I knew instantly that they were my brothers."

"Why were you on an island?"

Rotty chuckled. “I had to play detective to figure that out. I had looked around and saw a bunch of metal scraps around us. I’m guessing it was a plane.”

Shantae placed the pieces together. “You must have been in a plane crash.”

“Probably,” Rotty agreed. “Too bad. I always did like planes.”

“How did you come up with the name Rottytops?” Shantae asked.

“It just came to me,” Rotty said, placing her hands in her pockets. “Kinda like those nicknames. I don’t remember too much about my past. Abner and Poe could remember their names, so I didn’t have the chance to come up with anything for them,” she giggled. “I do remember when we were all born least. It was the year 534 for me.”

“That’s 2 years before me,” Shantae observed. “So how are you nineteen, then?”

“I’ve noticed that my body doesn’t exactly change,” Rotty explained.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t lose or gain any weight. My hair doesn’t grow even though it used to a lot, so I don’t think I’ll be getting a haircut. I don’t get hungry or thirsty, unless it’s coffee because... you know,” she said with a shrug. “And I’m not getting taller, that’s for sure.”

“So, you’re stuck like that?” Shantae asked, grimacing.

“Looks that way,” Rotty replied. “Why the sour look?”

“I... wouldn’t want a life like that,” Shantae replied.

“Good thing it’s me and not you then,” Rotty chuckled, booping Shantae on the nose.

“How are you so calm about this?” Shantae asked, baffled.

“I guess I don’t really think about it,” Rotty admitted. “The universe gave me this. Might as well make the best of it, right?.”

“I guess…”

“So, anymore questions about my life? Or do you want to go get those stones?”

“Bolo told me you could help me train my powers,” Shantae answered.

“Not sure how I can do that,” Rotty replied. “I guess I can be emotional support.”

“He said I shouldn’t rely on luck when it comes to hunting down these stones.”

“I can get behind that,” Rotty agreed. “We can train you on the way.”

“How much do you know about the stones?” Shantae asked.

“Well, Mimic told me to look after 2 of them. One’s in Sequin Land. The other’s in the Village of Lost Souls.”

“Is that a joke?” Shantae asked. *What village is she talking about?*

“Yeah,” Rotty laughed. “They’re *both* in the Village of Lost Souls.”

“What?”

“Ok, that time I was actually joking,” Rotty confessed with a grin.

“Don’t do that again,” Shantae sighed. “And what village are you even talking about?”

“I could show you, if you want,” Rotty offered. “That place has this weird rule where people can only enter in groups of two or more, so I kind of need you to be there with me.”

“Why did they come up with that?” Shantae asked.

“I don’t know,” Rotty admitted. “Guess they didn’t want people to be lonely. So what’s the game plan?”

“Mimic said I need to make sure Risky doesn’t get anymore of the stones, otherwise it’s game over.”

“In that case, we should get the stone in the village first. It has terrible security.”

“What even is this village?”

“Well, it’s like the underworld,” Rotty stated. “The living aren’t exactly welcome but some try to get in anyway.”

“And you can just waltz in?” Shantae assumed.

“Yep,” Rotty grinned. “I bypass that criteria, so I’m allowed in.”

“Why do they call it the ‘Village of Lost Souls?’”

“It’s usually a place for people who have died but haven’t found where they’re supposed to go,” Rotty explained. “It’s like a lottery, but the weird kind. People who go in tend to lose their memories.”

“Has that happened to you?”

Rotty shrugged. “Maybe. I don’t remember. Most times I go in I can remember who I am from the point I became a zombie.”

“Maybe the magic inside of you is guarding you or something,” Shantae assumed. “Maybe it can protect me as well.”

“Yeah, it would save time recapping what’s going on to you,” Rotty agreed.

“Mimic certainly picked you for a reason,” Shantae surmised.

“I guess he did,” Rotty chuckled. “What kind of magic do you know, anyway?”

“Well, I turn into animals when I dance,” Shantae explained.

“What ones have you turned into so far?” Rotty asked.

“A monkey and a bird,” Shantae answered.

“So you can fly?” Rotty asked, imagining the prospects. “Can you carry anyone?”

“I can carry at least one person,” Shantae answered, exciting Rotty. “Don’t get any ideas. I don’t want you to get into anymore crashes.”

“You wouldn’t drop me,” Rotty stated confidently.

“Still not risking it.”

“Fine. Can you turn into a spider?”

“I... don’t know. I don’t really like spiders.”

“That’s too bad,” Rotty sighed. “I love them. Hey, what’s that?” she asked, pointing to Shantae’s tiara.

“It’s my mom’s sapphire,” Shantae explained. “Uncle Mimic gave it to me years ago.”

“It sure is pretty,” Rotty observed. “Does it normally glow?”

“Huh?” Shantae asked, hovering her hand above the sapphire. From her palm she saw a blue light reflecting off her hand. “It’s never done that before.”

“Maybe it’s reacting to the magic in me?” Rotty guessed.

“No, it shouldn’t be,” Shantae answered, pulling her hand down. “Otherwise it would’ve gone off earlier with Harmony.”

“Who’s Harmony?”

“Another half-Genie,” Shantae said. “She’s a friend.”

“Huh. From the way Mimic spoke, I thought there was only one of you.”

“I did too,” Shantae admitted. “I met her yesterday.”

“You’ve only known her a day and she’s already your friend?” Rotty joked. “I wish we had that kind of trust.”

“Give me a break,” Shantae sighed. “You thought of me as a friend after five seconds.”

“I didn’t say this before, but I also give nicknames to people who I think will be my friends,” Rotty said with a smirk. “I knew we weren’t friends. I just wanted to see what your reaction would be.”

Shantae sighed. “I already got Bolo on my back for trusting her.”

“Funny how that *he’s* the suspicious one,” Rotty joked.

“What are you talking about?” Shantae asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I’ve seen that guy trust people who have scammed him more than once. And yet this chick gives him a bad vibe. Maybe he’s onto something.”

“She’s fine,” Shantae insisted.

“You sure like trusting people you don’t know,” Rotty observed. “I’m not one to talk, but this might lead to some trouble.”

Shantae groaned. “I know I’m going on a hunch, but there’s something about her I just trust.”

“If you say so,” Rotty said with a shrug. She patted Shantae on the back. “But I’m watching your back either way.”

Shantae let out a sigh. “Thanks,” she said.

Rotty noticed Shantae’s gem was still glowing. “Any idea how long that thing’s going to glow?”

Shantae shrugged. A picture of someone flashed into her eyes. This person, whoever they were, was frightened. Before Shantae could get a clear visual, the person vanished from her brain. Shantae’s body trembled, her hands holding against her throbbing head.

“You ok, Shantae?” Rotty asked, putting an arm around the unbalanced half-Genie.

“I felt like I saw someone,” Shantae said. “Like... a link with another person.”

“Who was it?” Rotty asked.

“I don’t know,” Shantae said groggily. “But it felt like magic, like yours.”

“You can sense magic?” Rotty asked.

“Just now,” Shantae said with a nod. “I could feel yours. I think I know why my mother’s sapphire was going off,” she said, observing that the gem was no longer glowing. “There must be some kind of link between my magic and yours.”

“Was being around me for too long set it off?”

“I think so,” Shantae agreed. “Your magic... felt like it was coming from someone else. Like... another half-Genie.”

“3 half-Genies in 2 days,” Rotty chuckled. “Must be a new record.”

“Rotty, I need to see who that was,” Shantae demanded.

Rotty’s joyful expression became serious. “Not if it’s going to hurt you again,” she stated. “And if you got hurt, there’s no telling how that other person might be feeling. You might make things worse.”

“Rotty... please,” Shantae pleaded. “I need to know who that person was. I can fix things if I talk to them.”

Rotty sighed. “I’m trusting you.”

“Thank you.” Shantae took a deep breath, pulling herself away from Rotty while finding her balance at last. She closed her eyes, beginning her concentration. Her thoughts slowed down, matching her heartbeat. Her sapphire glowed once again.

A young teenager, many years younger than Shantae, strolled down the hallway while pushing someone in a wheelchair. The teen had dark skin, black hair with a blue tint, and pointed ears. She wore a teal shirt and purple shorts. In her hair were green leaves that were tied to her hair. Her lips were curled into a smile, happily pushing the wheelchair forward.

In the wheelchair sat a paralyzed woman, draped in a white night gown, with grey hair and skin paler than a ghost's. She had fins for ears and two attanae, resembling a lobster's, that popped out of her head. The woman, try as she might, could not bring herself to match the teenager's smile. "Vera?" she murmured, her voice aching.

"Yeah, Mom?" the teen asked.

"I think that's enough for today," the woman, Iris, stated.

"What's wrong?" Vera asked, wrapping her arms around Iris. "Don't worry, Mom. I'm here for you."

Iris's lips creaked upward, placing her hand over Vera's. "Thank you." She let out a sigh. "I know you enjoy wheeling me around. And the time we spend together is nice. But... I miss the feeling. Feeling anything really."

Vera's smile became a grimace. "I'm sorry, Mom. I don't know why my magic can't heal you," she murmured, tightening her fists. "I've practiced so much get it to work. And yet…"

"It's perfectly fine, Vera," Iris consoled her, reaching up to She noticed a tear drop covering Vera's palm. "No need to cry. You're young and healthy, and that's a beautiful thing. You should enjoy yourself."

"But Mom…"

"No buts about it," Iris said, shaking her head. "I've lived this way for a long time. I can live a bit longer like this if I need to."

"Molly's still working on making those robo-legs for you," Vera added with a hopeful smile, referring to her brainiac of an older sister.

Iris nodded somberly. "I'm aware. And I should be grateful, but… it's just not the same…"

An ear-splitting shriek echoed throughout the hallway. Vera was writhing on the floor, curled up into a ball while holding onto her forehead. "Vera!" Iris shouted, craning her neck to see her daughter shaking in pain. "What's wrong?"

“My head!” Vera screamed. While no physical damage had been done, the sensation could be compared to slamming a hammer into her brain. “It won’t stop hurting!”

Iris spun her wheelchair around, reaching her hand out to Vera. However, the distance was too far for Iris to try to help Vera. Iris forced herself out of the wheelchair, plopping down inches away from Vera. Iris wrapped her arm around Vera “Vera, it’s okay. I’m here, you’re going to be fine,” she whispered.

Vera’s body quivered, but the pain was slowly beginning to subside. Her head was returning to normal. She saw her mother laying on the floor next to her. “Mom… you didn’t have to…”

Iris shook her head. “A mother’s got to help her kid. No buts about it.”

A magical cloud appeared before them, shaping itself into the appearance of a person. This person was old like Iris. However, while she shared grey hair with Iris, a single attanae hung over the woman’s head, with a green eyeball attached. She possessed a noticeable underbite that had her bottom teeth stick out, even with her mouth closed. She wore a torn purplish red cape over herself. The bottom half of her body was like a tree trunk with four green spheres, one from each quarter angle, that presumably acted as her equivalent to feet. This woman, Agnes, had a terrified look on her face. “What happened?!” she yelled, startling Vera and Iris.

“Please don’t yell…” Vera whispered, covering her ears with her leaves. “It still hurts…”

Agnes sighed, taking a deep breath. “*What happened?* ” she asked as quietly as possible, to the point nobody could actually hear her.

“What?” Vera and Iris asked simultaneously.

Agnes facepalmed herself. “Are you okay?” she asked, increasing the sound of her voice by a bit.

“I will be… I hope,” Vera stated, pulling herself up. “Thanks, Aunt Agnes.” She aided her mother up, with Agnes helping place Iris back

in the wheelchair.

“Thank you, you two,” Iris stated. She looked into Vera’s eyes. “Vera, do you have any idea what happened?”

“It was like… a shock,” Vera murmured. “I felt like somebody was there.” The shock shook her body again, startling Agnes into action. Agnes made sure to catch Vera before she hit the ground. “Not again,” she whimpered. Although it was painful, it wasn’t as bad as before. “Who’s causing this?”

Hello? Is anybody there? an older voice called out to her inside her mind.

“Who’s there?” Vera asked out loud, perplexing Iris and Agnes.

So you can hear me. That’s great! My name is Shantae.

“Shantae?” Vera repeated, gaining the strength to stand up.

“Who are you talking to?” Agnes asked, the eyeball on top of her head twisting and turning in hopes of seeing whoever Vera was talking to.

“I don’t know,” Vera admitted with a shrug. “Are you the one who hurt my head?” Vera questioned to the person on the other side.

Oh… sorry. Didn’t mean to do that…

“Well… you did it twice now…” Vera grumbled, rubbing her temples.

“Is there any way we can talk to this person?” Iris asked.

“If I knew, you would be,” Vera replied.

I think we’re linked somehow, Shantae continued. *Like our magic is intertwined or something. You’re a half-Genie like me. You’ve got the pointy ears to prove it!*

“What’s a half-Genie?” Vera asked.

“Who is this person?” Iris asked, becoming vexed. “And what

nonsense is she telling you?"

"She says I'm a half-Genie," Vera explained. "I don't know what she's talking about. Aren't Genies more of a thing on the other islands?"

Genies are guardians who protect the Earth from outside threats, Shantae stated. *At least, that's what my uncle told me.*

"What does your uncle have to do with this?" Vera questioned. "And nothing you've said so far has any proof. How does me having pointy ears prove I'm a half-Genie?"

He knew my mother, who is a Genie. He probably knew your mother too. You can talk to him at some point. And every half-Genie I've met so far has pointy ears.

"I have a mother," Vera said, her voice being a mixture of calm and infuriated.

Huh?

"It may not be by blood, but she's still my mother. And she's always been here for me."

I know this sounds strange, but I'm telling the truth! Shantae insisted. *Your mother is a Genie!*

"If my *mother* is a Genie, where is she now?" Vera asked.

Maybe she's protecting the Earth somewhere?

"From what?" Vera asked.

"I… am very lost," Agnes commented.

"Maybe we'll get a recap after this," Iris suggested. "Not much sense in trying to figure it out now."

I don't know exactly, Shantae admitted. *But I'm sure she cares about you a lot!*

“Then why hasn’t she visited? I’ve never seen her even *once* in my life,” Vera stated, tears beginning to drip from her eyes. “If she loves me, why didn’t she tell me she existed?”

“I don’t care if I’m a half-Genie or half-fish,” Vera spoke, her voice breaking. “I have a mother who loves me. I don’t need you talking about the one who doesn’t.”

But…

Vera sighed, cooling herself down. “Please leave,” she asked politely. “You’ve caused enough trouble. Please don’t cause anymore.”

I’m sorry.

Shantae opened her eyes, quickly touching her sapphire. The gem was no longer glowing.

“What happened?” Rotty asked, taking notice of the dejected look on Shantae’s face.

“I screwed up.”

Chapter 9

Chapter 9

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“What happened?” Rotty asked, seeing Shantae on her knees and covering her face.

“I screwed everything up,” Shantae murmured. “I brought up her mother and that made her mad. She said she already had one and didn’t need me bringing up the old one.”

“Shantae, who are you talking about?”

“I saw another half-Genie.”

“Oh. I see what’s going on,” Rotty murmured. “Mimic told me there weren’t any Genies still on Earth, so their kids probably aren’t going to like them.”

“I didn’t think she’d get so angry,” Shantae whispered. “I just wanted to clear things up with her. Rotty… you were right.”

Rotty sighed. “It’s too late to worry about that now. We got some stones to get.” She noticed Shantae was too dejected to move. She placed a hand on Shantae’s shoulder and looked her in the eyes. “Hey, look at me,” she said, prompting Shantae to pull her hands away from her face. “We’re going to get those stones and then we’ll try to fix things with that half-Genie, ok?”

Shantae slowly nodded. “I just don’t want Risky or her boss to find her. If they do, they could kill her and take her magic. And if I can’t be there to protect her…” Her body trembled with her next sentence. “Risky’s boss got into my head once. What if he got into it again and read my thoughts?”

“That wouldn’t tell him where she is,” Rotty pointed out. “Just that

she exists. After all, you couldn't tell where she was, either."

"Yeah, you're right," Shantae conceded weakly. "I just… feel so useless… I can't help that girl out at all."

"Maybe not," Rotty agreed. "But you know who you can help? Your uncle. Me. Hedgehog. And so many other people. You just need to stay focused. I know you can do it, but I'm not sure you know that."

Shantae smiled, finally standing up. She wrapped her arms around Rotty, making the latter chuckle. "Thanks, Rotty."

"Atta girl," Rotty said, grinning.

Iris rolled her wheelchair forward before she placed a hand on Vera's shoulder. Her daughter's eyes were not unlike the streams of a river. Despite Vera's calm response to the person on the other line, Iris could tell something was wrong. "You… want to talk about what just happened?"

Vera shook her head. "No… maybe later."

"I am *still* confused," Agnes murmured.

"Me too," Vera spoke quietly.

"Are you sure you don't want to talk about this?" Agnes asked.

"Give me a bit," Vera asked, rubbing her temples.

"Take your time," Iris said.

Vera nodded, leaving the hallway.

"You think she's going to be alright?" Agnes asked Iris.

"I don't know," Iris sighed. "Bringing up Aja never ends well."

"Any idea who was talking to Vera?"

"If I had to take a guess… a half-Genie," Iris replied.

“Aja was a Genie, right?” Agnes asked. “Maybe there’s a connection?”

“Perhaps,” Iris agreed.

“This has got me wondering,” Agnes admitted, crossing her arms. “I don’t want to judge your parenting skills, but why didn’t you ever tell Vera she’s part Genie? She knows she has magic. I see right now why you wouldn’t, but why not when she was a child?”

Iris let out a sigh. “I never told her because where I grew up, Genies were treated like gods for their presence alone. I didn’t want Vera thinking she was special just for existing. Not to mention people here don’t know about Genies that much. I don’t want Vera becoming a tourist attraction.”

“If it’s any consolation, I don’t think her magic would attract much attention,” Agnes pointed out. “She can’t and doesn’t use it that often. Last time she used it was when Nora broke her leg a few weeks ago. Nora got fixed up, but Vera had to sleep off the pain she felt.”

“She didn’t tell me about that,” Iris murmured. “Neither did Nora. I thought Vera was just sick that day.”

“Vera asked me not to,” Agnes admitted. “She didn’t want you to worry.”

“Makes sense,” Iris replied. “I do sometimes worry about Vera using her magic in public. I’ve never forbidden her from doing so, but I don’t want her to get hounded about it. I’m not sure what to do.”

“I get it,” Agnes replied. “But if people figured it out, we’d find an explanation.”

“Such as?”

“There are people on this island as weird as her,” Agnes said with a chuckle. “I got a third eye sticking out of my head. There are mermaids, people with scorpion tails, and more here. That’s why you picked this island to live on, right? So she wouldn’t stand out?”

“That was one reason,” Iris stated. “The other was that this is where I was born. Didn’t really grow up here though. Parents moved me to a new place as soon as I got here. I wanted to see what it was really like. That’s when I ended up meeting you.”

“Yeah, you and three kids,” Agnes laughed.

“I see a kid, I take care of them. No more thought needed than that,” Iris replied. “I just never expected any of them except Nora to call me Mom.”

“Shows you did a good job,” Agnes replied.

Iris’s lips creaked upward, forming a smile. “Thanks, Agnes. And you make a good aunt.”

“I’d hope so if they keep calling me that,” Agnes stated.

Iris’s smile began to fade. “Do you think I’m just being paranoid? With the Genie thing?”

“You want my honest opinion?” Agnes asked. “Yes.”

Iris chuckled. “I guess you’re right.”

“Tell you what,” Agnes offered. “I’ll take us all out for dinner tonight. My treat.”

“It would be nice to get out of the house,” Iris agreed. “And I think Vera might appreciate the gesture as well.”

Agnes smiled. “I hope so.”

Vera’s knuckles gently knocked against the door of her older sister, Molly. “Come in,” she could hear Molly say through the door. Vera creaked open the door, seeing a girl a year older than her tinkering with gadgets on her bed.

This girl wore a pink tank top with a yellow star on its center, yellow-tinted round glasses, and a cyan spiked hat with a single eye on it.

The girl had purple hair and green eyes as well. While the top half of her body appeared human, apart from her hat, the bottom half was anything but. Instead of legs, she had a blue seahorse tail and around her waist was a silver harness that had robotic legs attached.

Another girl, the same age as Vera, was sitting in a bean bag next to Molly. This girl had short lilac hair and wore a red shirt and white shorts. While most of her appearance resembled that of a human, there were two distinctive features that did not. She had fins for ears and antennae poking out of her head. In her hands was a comic book that she had just started reading. Her antennae stood up straight when she saw her sister. “Vera!” Nora said happily, standing up and dropping her comic book. She quickly noticed the wetness in her sister’s eyes. “Is something wrong?”

Molly looked up from her gadget to notice Vera’s eyes as well. “Vera?” she asked worriedly, getting off the bed and walking towards her younger sister. “Did something happen to Mom?”

Vera shook her head. “No, she’s fine,” she stated.

“But you’re not,” Nora pointed out. “What happened?”

“Yeah, you’re usually not… crying…” Molly said, awkwardly trying to put the words together.

“It does have to do with *a* mom,” Vera admitted, her voice breaking up. “Somebody called me, trying to tell me I was something called a half-Genie.”

“A what?” Molly asked.

“Oh, a Genie?” Nora asked eagerly. “This is like that book I read. The one where a daring Genie tries to save the world from a demon from another dimension!”

“What?” Vera and Molly asked simultaneously, both dumbfounded by Nora’s eccentricity.

“Yeah, the book I read a bit ago,” Nora explained. “I didn’t like the ending though. Too bittersweet.”

“How much soda have you been drinking today?” Molly groaned, rubbing her head.

“Not much…” Nora said sheepishly. “Just three cans in the last… half hour…”

“*Not much*, huh?” Molly remarked, unamused.

“She’s not *that* far off, actually,” Vera admitted.

“Really?” Nora asked, her antennae perking up excitedly.

“The person calling me said she was a half-Genie and I was too,” Vera spoke. “She said Genies protect the Earth.”

“Wait… Genies?” Molly asked. “I don’t really much about them. They’re kinda like gods, right?”

Vera shrugged. “I don’t really understand it myself.”

“Nobody’s seen a Genie in decades,” Nora interjected, prompting a look from Molly.

“How do you know this?” Molly asked.

“I read stuff,” Nora shrugged. “*A lot* of stuff. Especially books that come from other islands. The ones on Genies are really expensive though,” she admitted, reminiscing about her monthly allowance being spent rather quickly over the last couple of years. “Some of them only have one copy in existence.”

“I… uh… never mind,” Molly murmured. She turned to face Vera. “Vera, how did this person know you were a *half-Genie* ?” she asked in a dubious tone.

“She said I had pointy ears,” Vera explained.

“That *is* a trait of Genies,” Nora pointed out.

“Wait, how did she know what you looked like?” Molly asked.

“The call… wasn’t an ordinary one,” Vera stated. “It was like… a

psychic call? She was calling from inside my head. I couldn't see what she looked like, but she could see me. And she said her name was Shantae."

"Hm… Genies are capable of that if a certain magic spell is performed or used on them," Nora noted. "It's possible you could have met Shantae before, or somebody gave this connection to the both of you."

"If I did meet her, I don't remember it," Vera replied.

"When you first got here, you were crying," Molly pointed out. "What did she say that made you cry?" Molly asked.

Vera took a deep breath. "She mentioned… my mom. My birth mom. Shantae said she was a Genie. And I got… *mad* ," she said, trying to stay calm. "I asked her where my *mom* was and she couldn't answer, claiming she was off somewhere *protecting* the Earth," she said, her mood shifting slowly into a more aggressive one.

"Mom's never really told us about your birth mom," Nora said.

"I thought she died," Molly assumed. "That's why Mom never really brought her up. Same with Nora's dad."

"No, she *left* me," Vera said, her rage creeping into her voice. "And my dad. He took care of me, even when he got sick."

"Mom never told me that…" Molly murmured.

"Me neither," Nora said with a small head shake.

"She said she only told me and Aunt Agnes," Vera explained. "Everything Mom knows, she got from my dad."

"Did your dad say anything about your birth mother?" Molly asked.

"Only that she left me at his doorstep."

"Do you think she had any reason to?" Nora asked.

"No," Vera said bitterly. "She didn't even leave a note."

Molly walked over to Vera and put both hands on her sister's shoulders. "I'm going to ask you a question and you don't have to answer immediately. What do you think about your birth mother?"

"I-I… don't know," Vera stammered, her hands curling into fists. "I hate that she just abandoned me. She left my dad to raise me all by himself, even when he was bedridden. Not once did she visit. Not once did she let us know that she loved us."

"Maybe you don't have the full story here?" Nora suggested. "She could have died. Or maybe she was already dying and thought your dad was the best person to raise you?"

Vera sighed, her anger beginning to subside. "I guess that's possible."

"Vera, do you want to know more about your birth mother?" Molly asked. "I can tell it's got you angry."

"I told Shantae I didn't," Vera murmured. "But… part of me does? It's like a book inside of me that I can't close, even though I want to."

"Let's try to close it for you," Molly suggested.

"What are you suggesting?" Vera asked.

"We could try to look for your mother and see what happened to her," Molly offered, patting Vera on the back. "I get the feeling Nora might have a clue where she is."

"Well, it's just a theory, but going off what I've read, she could be in the Village of Lost Souls," Nora stated.

"And what is that?" Vera asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Good question," Molly agreed. "What is that?"

"From what I know, it's a place some people end up when they die. It's some kind of in between place for people who haven't found their way to the afterlife. The magic in Genies makes them more susceptible to ending up there," Nora explained. "Their magic can sometimes be a barrier for them."

“Why do they call it Lost Souls?” Vera asked nervously. “And would this affect me when I die?”

“It’s because the denizens have lost their memory and can only regain it through contact with a relative or loved one,” Nora continued. “As for the second part… I don’t know. Maybe ‘cause you’re a half-Genie, it won’t work?” she said nervously.

“That’s… not reassuring,” Vera murmured, shivering at the thought. “But my birth mom might be there at least?”

“There’s a chance,” Nora replied. “And apparently, we can only be in there for a short while. People who stay too long tend to lose their memories if they don’t leave.”

“So people in there might actually be alive?” Vera asked.

“Alive people you can touch,” Nora added. “Dead ones you can’t.”

“How do you know all of this?” Vera asked.

“I saved up a *lot* of money,” Nora explained. “A year’s worth, at least. These books about the Genies just fascinated me. They had godlike power and yet still chose to do good with it. I wanted to know why they aren’t around anymore. The book didn’t give an answer, though.”

“How do you even know what the books say is real?” Vera asked.

“It claimed it was written by a real Genie,” Nora answered. “She gave a warning towards the end that seemed off. She said not all the Genies were good people and some had to be fought.”

“What did she mean?” Vera asked.

“I don’t know,” Nora shook her head somberly. “The last thing she says… is to tell her daughter in case something should come up that her parents love her.”

As soon as that sentence passed Nora’s lips, the room grew silent. It took a short while for anyone to speak up. “Did she mention her daughter’s name?” Vera finally asked.

“Harmony,” Nora answered.

Vera took a deep breath. “Ok. We have two goals. First, we find out what happened to my mom. Then, we show Harmony that book.”

“How are we supposed to find Harmony?” Nora asked. “I barely have an idea how to find the Village of Lost Souls.”

“Considering how lucky we were you had those books to begin with, I feel we’ll probably be able to find Harmony,” Molly pointed out. “Coincidence seems to be your speciality. And…” She looked into Nora’s eyes. “I hope you’re right about this,” she spoke, her words carrying a tone of cautious optimism.

“If it’s not, I’ll do both of your chores for the next month,” Nora offered with a smile.

“Two,” Molly demanded, grinning.

“Fine,” Nora groaned.

In the corner of Vera’s eye, she took notice of machinery laying on Molly’s bed. “What were you working on, anyway?” she asked.

“Mom’s new legs,” Molly answered.

“It’s almost done,” Nora said, clasping her hands together eagerly.

“Just a few more tweaks and she’ll be walking again in no time,” Molly stated proudly.

Vera smiled. *That might put her in a better mood,* she thought to herself. A knock pounded on the door.

“You kids busy?” Agnes asked through the door.

“Yes,” Nora joked with a snort.

“Oh… should I come back?” Agnes asked with uncertainty.

Molly lightly elbowed Nora in the rib. “Ow,” Nora murmured. “What was that for?”

“Come in, Aunt Agnes,” Molly permitted.

Agnes opened the door and noticed the machinery on Molly’s bed. “I see that’s almost done,” she observed, holding her hands against the door jambs. “Anyway, I was going to take you three out for dinner tonight. My treat.”

“Really?” Nora asked, grinning from fin to fin.

“Yeah, I figured that might do you all some good,” Agnes stated. “Just keep it healthy… and you know…” she said, shaking her head. “...reasonably priced.”

“Can we watch a movie after?” Vera asked.

“Sure,” Agnes said with a shrug. “There’s got to be one from my collection you haven’t seen yet. What kind?”

“Fantasy,” Nora answered quickly. Unfortunately for her, her sisters had responded at the same time as she had.

“Comedy,” Vera had answered.

“Sci-fi,” Molly had said.

“Huh,” Agnes murmured. “I’ll let you three sort it out. Agnes out.” She shut the door, leaving the trio to their devices.

“It would seem we have reached an impasse,” Molly noted. “I think we can surely agree that comedy is out, right? You can find comedy in almost any film.”

“She’s got a point,” Nora admitted.

“Nora…” Vera groaned. “Comedy is great though. It cheers you up a lot more than the other two, especially when you focus on it.”

“That is *also* true,” Nora agreed.

Molly sighed, realizing she was unlikely to get the majority on her side by later tonight. “We’re never going to watch a movie at this rate…”

If you're wondering why Nora, or Lobster Siren as she's called in the games, speaks normally rather than squeaking, I could not find a way to incorporate it in the story that well. This is especially true due to her being the daughter of Iris, or Empress Siren in the games, in this version, as Iris speaks normally like her original game counterpart.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10

The night prior...

Bolo and Sky stood in front of the dungeon: the Golem Mines. It was a temple composed of granite blocks that formed its walls. On the walls were carvings of monsters with a rocky composition. There was a concrete door, albeit with no handle or visible means of opening it.

“Is this it?” Bolo asked, turning to Sky.

“Should be,” Sky replied. “Good boy, Wrench,” she said, petting Wrench under his beak. The bird cawed, opening his mouth. Sky sighed, pulling out some bird seed from her pocket. “Fine. You’ve gotten us this far,” she said, holding the seed out for Wrench to collect. No longer in pajamas, Sky now wore a light blue crop top and matching sarong as well as pink earrings and purple shoes. Her blonde hair was tied back by a blue headwrap while a purple hood covered her head.

“How did you teach him to do that?” Bolo asked. “The giant thing.”

“It’s a trick I found out he could do years ago,” Sky said casually. “Not sure how he’s able to do it, but he can.”

“How come you never showed me or Shantae?” Bolo questioned, observing the locked door.

“I wasn’t sure how it worked back then,” Sky admitted, walking to his side. “And do you really want a bigger version of him trying to bite your head?” she with a smirk.

Bolo kept looking at the door, not wanting to look Wrench in the eye. “...No.” He looked upward, scanning the door for any possible

keyholes. He noticed two green orbs, one to the far left and far right of the door. “Maybe that’s the way,” he murmured.

“Mimic told me of a way to open it,” Sky explained. “We have to turn it 30 degrees clockwise, then 45 counter, then 55 clockwise, and finally, 25 counter.”

“How did he come up with that?” Bolo asked.

“That’s what Shantae’s mom told him,” Sky shrugged. “He told me she was a bit dumb.”

“Like… *me* dumb?” Bolo asked.

“Mimic said it varied from moment to moment,” Sky sighed, crossing her arms. “She thought it’d be a good idea to hide the stones in these dungeons.”

“Well, Risky can move them, so she has an advantage over us. The best we can do is try to stop her here and now.”

“How did Risky get the first stone, anyway?” Sky asked.

“She let us fight off the stone’s guard and she took it when we were too tired to do anything,” Bolo explained. “Why?”

“Let’s try what she did,” Sky advised. “We can wear her down to the point she’ll be easy to beat.”

“You think that’ll work?” Bolo questioned.

“It’s worth a try,” Sky suggested.

“Maybe she left a map telling us where all the traps are,” Bolo suggested.

“Bolo, she wouldn’t be stupid enough to… okay, you have a point,” Sky sighed. “We need to be careful. It might take hours to-”

“Is this it?” Bolo asked, holding up a rolled up map in his hand.

“Wha- how?” Sky asked, blinking in disbelief.

“Found it on the right as soon as we walked in,” Bolo stated, opening it up. “Hard to read, though.”

“Uh, Bolo…” Sky murmured, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“I’m holding it upside down, aren’t I?”

“Eh… sideways, but close enough.” Bolo sighed, turning the map ninety degrees. “*Now* it’s upside down.” Bolo groaned, spinning the map to its correct position.

“Scary to think Risky could have used this against us if she got here first,” Sky shuddered.

“Best not to think about it,” Bolo replied. “Oh hey, there’s a vending machine in this place.”

“Why would a dungeon have a vending machine?” Sky questioned.

“Maybe there are people inside who get hungry,” Bolo suggested.

Sky sighed. “What kinds of traps are there?”

“There’s one area nearby that’s near some lava,” Bolo stated. “The room’s really hot, so that might tire her out. Then there’s a room after that’s full of some sticky vines in the ground. It would probably keep her stuck for a while. And then there’s a room with a golem that has the key.”

“A golem? What’s that?”

“Oh, they’re rock people,” Bolo casually, as if the answer was obvious.

“Rock people?” Sky asked, raising an eyebrow.

Bolo nodded. “Yeah. You’ve never seen one before?”

“No,” Sky shook her head. “I didn’t even know they existed.”

“There are some that live in Water Town,” Bolo replied. “They’re my neighbors. Nice people. Except for *Steve*,” he said, his expression

turning resentful.

“Okay then…” Sky murmured before returning her focus to the map. “Those traps could work. But the issue is convincing her to take those paths. We’d need to cut down her options until she’s forced to go those ways.”

Bolo observed how the map was marked. There was an X on the points where he assumed the doors were. Bolo spoke, “These Xs might mean it’s entrance only.”

“So we just need to get her inside and shut the door?” Sky asked.

“Given who made this map, maybe,” Bolo stated.

“I hate that you’re right,” Sky murmured. “The lava room is going to be tricky. We can’t just hide in there and shut the door on her. We’d have to wait outside.”

Bolo chuckled. “I happen to be an *expert* on stealth.”

Sky grimaced. “The way you say that worries me.”

“I train all the time,” Bolo assured her. “I can do this.”

Sky sighed. “Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“Okay. I’m counting on you,” Sky replied. “I’ll take the vine room. You take the lava room.”

Bolo grinned. “This’ll be easy.”

Risky Boots stood in front of the Golem Mines, taking a moment to observe the craftsmanship. *Well put together,* she observed, rubbing her hand against the granite. *And given how the texture feels, it seems to be protected by magic.* She placed her pistol back in her pocket. *That ain’t gonna work.*

I told you to slow down , the voice in her head echoed. *Do you not remember what I told you?*

Risky smiled. *Too bad you wasted that trick on me,* she taunted her boss. *How many do you have left in you this week? One?*

I have enough left to help you, assuming you come back begging to accept it.

Risky snorted. *How are things with Harmony?*

That's not important.

You know, I've been thinking about something. That temper of yours. You really should fix it, Risky mocked the voice. *If you controlled it, I'd still have to listen to you.* She could hear the voice growling, making this all the more satisfying. *And now that I'm free of your tricks, I can just waltz up to Harmony and tell her the truth.*

Don't you dare *call your delusions the truth,* the voice growled. *And my men wouldn't let you anywhere near her, even if you tried.* She noticed a dozen Tinkerbats to the left and right of her, their expressions more vicious than they normally were. The sight slightly unnerved her.

It wouldn't matter if all my men turned against me, Risky replied, trying to keep her cool. *I will find her. And she will abandon you. Just like you did to me. And to them.*

That's ENOUGH! the voice roared, making Risky grab onto her throbbing head. *I've never claimed to be a perfect man. I've done terrible things. I've let people down. But I will* not *let the past shackle me down. I'll make things right.*

Risky smiled once more, the pain beginning to clear. *Here's what's going to happen, boss.* Her pronunciation of the last word was rife with mockery. *I'm going to get those stones and show them to Harmony. And when I do, I'll tell her everything. That's when I'll free you. So she can look you in the eye and see what you really are.*

You wouldn't last a second after I'm free.

I don't mind, Risky taunted the voice. *Beats having to listen to you. Now if you'll excuse me…* She took a step forward, entering the dungeon. *I have a stone to find.* She noticed the Tinkerbats approaching her aggressively. *They can't get the stones, you know. But I can.*

You think I need you? the voice retorted. *I only kept you around because of our past. If I wanted to, I could convince Harmony to go after them.*

And what if Harmony got a second opinion? Risky snarked. *That girl and her crew seem like better companions than you.*

Don't you dare…

You're scared, aren't you? Risky snarked. *Because you're not in control anymore.*

Get rid of her! The Tinkerbats lunged at her, making her spin around in preparation. She pulled out her pistol, setting the mode to stun, and fired away. Six Tinkerbats fell to the ground, twitching before falling unconscious. The rest dodged the energy bullets, prompting her to spin kick another three. Three remaining Tinkerbats scratched at her skin, making her punch one of them that had lunged onto her arm. She headbutted the next one off her other arm, and kneed the final Tinkerbat scratching her legs. She let out a sigh, thankful the remaining Tinkerbats had stayed on the ship. On the other hand, she realized she was now without transportation.

Risky sighed, pulling out the lamp. She considered herself fortunate it was small enough to fit in her pocket. *Good thing I held onto this,* she thought. She continued walking into the dungeon, looking around and observing the dungeon's interior. The slabs of granite were identical in appearance to the exterior, although from touching it, they lacked the magical protection and appeared far less sturdy. There was only one path forward from what she could tell.

From the end of the hallway, as she was walking, she noticed the pathway seemed to open up into two more directions. She stopped in front of the door ahead of her and looked left and then right. There was a door in each direction. She turned around, hearing a crash in

the wall. From there, she noticed the granite was scattered across the ground, pieces building up. She looked around, hearing another smash in the wall. When she caught sight of the damage, she noticed the pieces were trying to box her in.

That's when she saw the spiked ball heading straight for her leg. She leaped back, getting closer to the center door. She saw Bolo in front of her, waving his weapon in the air. He shot it into the wall next to her, then yanked it out. The granite in the wall came collapsing down, sealing off the right door. He swung the flail towards Risky, making her duck under it. The granite soon collapsed in on the left side, leaving Risky with only two options.

"That stone's not as sturdy as it looks," Bolo said with a grin. "Falls apart real quick." His confident expression turned to one of shock. Risky had dropped her pistol and scimitar. "Been waiting forever for you to show up."

"Look, I don't want to fight you," she stated seriously.

Bolo studied her expression, looking for any genuinity in her face. "Yeah, I'm not falling for that again," he said, whacking her in the stomach with his flail. She wheezed as Bolo yanked the flail away. He began swinging the flail, preparing to launch another attack.

"I'm being serious," Risky gasped, picking herself up.

"Like you were before, *Rachel*?" Bolo confronted her.

Risky let out a sigh. "I get why you don't believe me. But there's something you need to hear. That voice that got in your head earlier… he's got Harmony under his wing."

Bolo paused for a moment, lowering his flail. "What's Harmony got to do with this?"

"He thinks he's her friend," Risky explained. "But I know the truth. He's going to drain her dry, just like the other Genies who fought him."

"How do you know that?" Bolo asked. "And why should I believe you?"

“I know because that’s what he’s always done. Whenever there was an opportunity to keep himself ahead of the game, he took it. As for believing me, I’m the only one who can free him.” She pulled the lamp out of her pocket, holding it up for Bolo to see. “Without this, he’s trapped forever.”

“What do you benefit from keeping him in your head?” Bolo asked.

“Not much,” Risky chuckled. “A clear head would be nice, but the chance to screw him over is just as good. Especially now that his mind trick’s useless for a while.”

“And you want to team up with us?” Bolo questioned.

“I think you’ll agree we have a mutual enemy,” Risky stated.

“How do I know you’re not just letting him listen in to this chat?” Bolo asked.

“He probably is,” Risky admitted. “The fact he’s been silent for a bit has kept me wondering. So I don’t recommend giving away any important information.”

“What’s your end goal exactly?” Bolo asked.

“Tear him away from Harmony,” Risky stated. “As long as she’s listening to him, she’ll defend him no matter what. That’s where you and the girl come in.”

“Girl? You mean Shantae?” Bolo asked.

Risky sighed. “*Yes.*”

“But what do we have to do with your plan?” Bolo questioned the pirate.

“Harmony will probably trust you two more,” Risky stated. “He’s already turned her against me. And given you recognize her name, I assumed you might know her.”

“A few more things,” Bolo demanded, pointing an angry finger at her. “Has your boss forced you to do any of this? And is your name

actually Rachel?”

“What?” Risky asked. “Everything I’ve done so far has been my choice. And it’s Risky.”

“Oh,” Bolo murmured, a tinge of disappointment infecting his voice. “Does that include when he scared me? Did you tell him to do that?”

Risky shook her head. “No.” She became reticent for a moment, imagining what horrors her boss had forced Bolo and many others into. “I’m sorry he did that.”

“Did you just… apologize?” Bolo asked, dumbfounded.

“Don’t remind me,” Risky groaned. “So, do we have a deal?”

“I’d have to go over it with Sky, but maybe,” Bolo stated. “Follow me.”

Sky listened in to the faint sounds of the hallway. Wrench had recently grown in size and sunk his claws in the ceiling, hanging upside down. Sky held onto his wings, trying to remain undetected. *Please don’t look up.* There was a chance Risky wouldn’t see her, given how dark the hallway was, but she didn’t want to take any chances.

“Sky? You here?” a familiar voice asked.

Bolo?

“So I’ve got an idea. At first, you’re really going to hate it. But maybe, just maybe, you might warm up to it.”

I don’t like where this is going.

She could hear the groan of another voice. “We formed a truce. Get out here,” the voice stated.

Is that Risky? Sky wondered. She leaped down, making eye contact with Bolo and the pirate. Wrench followed her down, shrinking

incrementally as he descended. He caught onto Sky's shoulder, making her instinctively pet his head.

"I expect you want the details on what's going on," Risky assumed.

Sky turned to Bolo, taking a deep breath. "Bolo. *Please* tell me you aren't doing this because you find her hot."

"No!" Bolo shouted, his cheeks crimson. "I mean I do, but that's not the reason."

Risky groaned, facepalming herself. She returned her gaze to Sky. "I haven't met you before. Who are you?"

"What's your angle?" Sky demanded.

"I'll get to that," Risky stated, slightly vexed. "Now, what's your name?"

"Sky," the young woman said, crossing her arms. Wrench clung to her shoulder, crossing his arms as well.

"I'll answer any question you have," Risky explained. "Ask away."

"Wait," Bolo stated, drawing attention to himself. "Before any of that, we need code names."

"Why?" Risky and Sky asked simultaneously, prompting them to look at each other in surprise.

"Easier to recognize each other," Bolo explained. He pointed at Sky. "You shall be… War Bird."

"That's… not too bad actually," Sky admitted.

Bolo turned to Risky. "And you will be-"

"Save it," Risky said, cutting him off. "If my boss is listening, there's not much point in code names."

"Wait, listening?" Sky questioned.

Risky nodded. "Nice to know you're capable of it," she snarked,

making Sky's eye twitch. "My boss can listen in to my conversations whenever he likes. I don't have any control over what he hears. Anything we say could possibly be heard by him."

"Ok," Sky stated. "Bolo, whatever you say, think *extremely* carefully about what you say next."

"I will," Bolo stated with a grin. "I'm not as dumb as I look."

"I know, but sometimes… you say things and you don't think before you do," Sky pointed out, putting her hands together nervously.

"You are pretty gullible to be honest," Risky admitted with a chuckle. "He thought I wanted to go out with him."

"You didn't have to bring that up," Bolo murmured. "I'm not the one who put on a whole act about it."

"How does asking Bolo out get you the stone?" Sky questioned, more confused than anything else.

"I'm not attracted to him," Risky stated. "I thought it would help get his trust, and then the stone from said trust."

"Okay then," Sky said, trying to take in all this information. "Tell me about your boss. Who is he?"

"I don't know his actual name," Risky admitted.

"A lot of trust, I see," Sky snarked.

"Don't remind me," Risky sighed. "In his life, he went by many names. Most just called him the Pirate Master."

"And how did you end up working for him?" Sky questioned.

"Arrogance," Risky said, sighing. "He showed me a path forward and I thought I could use it to my advantage."

"So why quit?" Bolo asked. "And why is he in your head?"

"That's a long one," Risky yawned. "Buy me a drink and then we can

continue," she offered.

Sky sighed. "Fine," she grumbled. "Let's get the stone first."

Risky rubbed her chin. "Do you have a plan for the stones?"

"We… don't know," Bolo admitted, prompting Risky to laugh.

"A lot of trust between you and that old man," the pirate snarked.

"I figured Mimic would tell us afterward," Sky stated.

"Don't get too attached to Mimic," Risky warned. "He's more interested in protecting those stones than he is you two."

"You've said that before. What do you mean?" Bolo asked.

"Ah," Risky said, wagging her finger. "A drink first, remember?"

Bolo sighed, turning around. "Stone first," he replied as Sky followed behind him.

"Keep on guard," Sky whispered into Bolo's ear. "She knows a lot more than we do."

Risky walked behind the two, following them down the hallway. There was one final door, made out of rock. Bolo tapped on the door eleven times, causing it to zip open.

"How did you know that would work?" Sky asked. "Did the map tell you?"

"No, I tried to think of what I would do, and then I cranked it up to eleven," Bolo explained. "I figured that was the trick."

Despite her look of bewilderment, Sky chuckled. "A broken clock is right twice a day."

"I didn't see a clock in here," Bolo commented, looking around.

"Never mind," Sky sighed, rubbing her forehead.

"Who even designed this dungeon?" Risky asked, raising an

eyebrow.

Bolo grinned. “Stone first,” he repeated, entering the room. From there, the room was mostly empty apart from the walls. The most notable aspect of the room was a stone golem with a gray complexion matching the wall. In fact, he was part of the wall itself. He lacked both arms and legs. He had a massive, rocky jaw, which seemed almost detached from the rest of his face, especially as he was beginning to stir awake.

“Who’s there?” the rock person spoke, his jaw making a cracking sound. He looked down. “Oh. I gotcha. Name’s Samson.”

“You can talk?” Sky asked.

“I take it the rocks you normally see don’t,” Samson assumed.

“Mine do,” Bolo admitted. “They come by a lot in Water Town.”

“I’ve seen them once or twice,” Risky added.

Sky blinked rapidly, trying to process a visual image of what Bolo and Risky had been talking about. “Never mind that,” she said, waving the thought away. “Samson, we need your help. We need to take the Elemental Stone. An evil pirate wants it and-”

“Yeah, I know,” Samson cut her off. “Ana filled me in when she came here. The person who would come here would need the stone.”

“Ana?” Sky asked.

“Oh, the purple-haired Genie. Kind of kooky, to be honest,” Samson explained.

“That must be Shantae’s mom,” Bolo assumed.

“She has a daughter?” Samson asked. “She never mentioned that. Do either of you know where Ana is?”

Sky shook her head. “No. She hasn’t been seen in over a decade.”

“And what of her lover? The mighty Karnov,” Samson stated.

“He hasn’t been seen either,” Sky replied.

“Then who has been raising their daughter?” Samson questioned, his expression becoming uneasy.

“A very kind man named Mimic,” Sky answered. Risky scoffed, prompting a sharp glare from Sky.

“Assuming you’re telling the truth, I’m glad to know that. Tell him he has my thanks.”

Sky nodded. “I will.”

“Hey, have you always been here?” Bolo asked.

“I suppose I have,” Samson admitted. scratching his stony chin. “Usually I just count to myself. I like to see how far I can get before I fall asleep. I’ve broken my record a few times.”

“Do you eat?” Sky questioned, grimacing.

“No need,” Samson shook his head.

“You don’t get bored?” Bolo questioned.

“I did once,” Samson admitted before his tone became more serious. “*Only* once.”

“D-do you want to elaborate?” Sky asked, slightly nervous.

“No,” Samson said solemnly. “I take it you want the stone for safekeeping?”

“That’s kind of the problem,” Bolo murmured. “Only she can move it,” he said, pointing to Risky.

“We already have one of the stones,” Risky stated, walking up to the golem. She pulled it out of her pocket, holding up to the golem.

“I understand.” Samson gently closed his eyes. He opened his mouth, revealing the stone floating inside.

Risky grabbed the stone and placed it in her pocket. “Alright. I did what you wanted,” she stated. “Time for a drink.”

Bolo sighed. “I wish that vending machine had drinks…”

“This dungeon sucks…” Sky murmured.

The trio made their way out of the dungeon, with Samson talking in the background. “Good luck with your journey!”

They were greeted by the bright sunlight of the morning. “How long were we in that dungeon?” Sky yawned.

“Several hours?” Bolo surmised. “Guess we waited a while for Risky to show up.”

Wrench flew off Sky’s shoulder, gently touching the ground. From there, his body grew in size, towering over the trio. He flapped his wings and let out a caw. “Thanks, Wrench,” Sky stated, looking up to her friend.

“I should get one of those,” Risky stated, admiring the bird.

Sky climbed up Wrench’s back, holding onto him firmly. “Get on,” she told the other two. Bolo followed suit, and then Risky.

“A lot more room than I was expecting,” Risky admitted, astonished that three people could sit comfortably on the bird’s back without risk of falling off.

“Where are we headed?” Sky asked. “We don’t know where Shantae is. And we’ve gotten all the stones we can so far.”

“Remember not to say anything important out loud,” Risky reminded them.

“First off, we need to establish some ground rules,” Bolo stated. “No stealing each other's food.”

“What?” Sky and Risky asked simultaneously.

“Every time I have guests in my house, people steal my food. I

mean, I'm going to give some to them anyway, but they just take it without asking. And my cinnamon buns are always going missing. I save those for important occasions."

"Pretty sure Shantae's just eating your cinnamon buns," Sky assumed.

"Wait... that was Shantae?" Bolo asked, feeling of ping of disappointment.

"She always eats mine," Sky said with a shrug.

"What did you mean by 'important occasions?'" Risky asked.

"They're for when I'm sad and I need to cry," Bolo murmured.

Sky gave a sympathetic chuckle. "I know the feeling."

Risky sighed, rubbing her temples. *I don't know how to respond to* any *of that.*

Chapter 11

Chapter 11

“Take us to Spider Forest,” Risky ordered.

“Why?” Sky asked, soaring through the air on Wrench while Risky and Bolo sat behind her. “You don’t have to be picky. It’s just a drink.”

“It’s not that,” Risky stated. “I’m trying to find a spot close to where Harmony woke up. If we can find someone who saw her, we might have an idea where she is now.”

“That’s actually a good idea,” Bolo said.

Sky sighed, patting Wrench on the neck, prompting the bird to soar even faster. After some time had passed, the dungeon was now within their sights.

“That small house might have a clue,” Risky stated, pointing down at a creaky wooden house.

“Never seen that before,” Bolo commented.

“Hey, where are all the spiders?” Sky questioned, noticing the lack of the forest’s namesake.

“My boss must’ve scared them away,” Risky assumed as they descended near the home. “If even one of those spiders got scared by him, it likely warned the others to get away.”

Sky shuddered. While she was not fond of spiders, the lack of them felt more disturbing than having them there. “I’m going to be completely honest with you guys,” Sky said as the trio got off Wrench’s back. “I have *no* idea how either of you are handling this.”

“What do you mean?” Bolo asked.

“All this weirdness!” Sky exclaimed, throwing her arms into the air.

“I’ve been trying to play it cool, but we’re probably being watched right this second. That monster is planning to kill the Genies and thanks to her…” She pointed an accusatory finger in Risky’s face, “He knows our every move!”

Risky groaned. “As long as you’re not blurting out important info within earshot, you should be fine. His little mind invasion trick only has one more try for right now and I doubt he’s going to waste it on you. He can only read my thoughts, not yours.”

Sky groaned. “You’d better be telling the truth,” she demanded. “If you’re leading us to him, you will *regret* it.”

“There is nothing I gain from lying to you,” Risky barked. “And as much as I don’t like you, I wouldn’t even hand *you* off to him.”

Sky stared coldly into Risky’s eyes, fiercely gritting her teeth. Bolo took a few steps closer, patting Sky on the back. “Hey, it’s gonna be ok.”

“You don’t know that,” Sky grumbled, trying not to let her eyes moisten up. “We could all be dead soon and I’m the only one who sees it coming!”

Risky took a deep breath. “Sky, was it?” the pirate woman asked. “I can’t make you trust me. But this isn’t about saving my life over yours if that’s what you’re thinking. I couldn’t care less if I die. But I do care about people other than myself. I don’t know if you know this, but there’s another half-Genie named Harmony.”

Sky’s expression changed from one of anger to a mixture of surprise and worry. “Who’s that?”

“Oh that’s somebody Shantae and I met yesterday,” Bolo said casually, which prompted a flabbergasted look from Sky. “...which I forgot to tell you about…” he said nervously, backing away.

“As I was saying,” Risky continued. “My boss had trapped her in a dream world for all her life. Every memory she has of her family is fake. And my boss is using that to gain her loyalty. If she gains full control of her abilities under his guidance and she sets him free, I

don't think we stand a chance." Risky looked into Sky's eyes, placing her hands onto the blonde's shoulders. "I don't know how this is all going to end. If you don't want to help, then leave. I'm not stopping you. And I won't let goofball over here stop you either."

"Wait, hold up," Bolo interjected. "What if she needs a second opinion?"

Risky considered Bolo's words, remembering them coming from herself not too long ago. *Seems Harmony's not the only one who needs help,* she thought as she took a few steps back. "Then make your case for why she should stay," Risky replied, reflecting on Bolo's last sentence.

Bolo turned to Sky, approaching the nervous young woman. "Hey, Sky. I'm not really good at these speeches and all that, but uh… you're a good friend. Besides my granny and Shantae, you're the only other actual friend I've got. And when this is all over, we could… I-I don't know… uh… go on a date?"

"...What?" Risky asked, utterly unable to recognize what Bolo had just said.

"Bolo, you feel that way about me?" Sky asked, various thoughts swirling around in her head. While she did not find Bolo particularly attractive, she did not consider herself to be a picky individual. And she was desperate to have *some* love in her life. *Wait, how would this affect our friendship going forward?* she wondered. *How would Mom react to this? She'd find a way to ruin things again.*

"Well, I'm not in love with you or anything," Bolo said with a nervous chuckle. "I just thought you might be happy to have a date since your last one was… uh… pretty long ago?"

Sky began giggling. "I appreciate the offer, Bolo." She tapped her finger against her chin, contemplating her options. *He's a good guy, but he still hasn't gotten over that trance problem with other women. I know he can probably work on it, but it would nag me until it gets fixed.*

"So, what do you say?" Bolo asked.

“I think I’m going to pass on that offer,” Sky said. “I like our friendship the way it is now, and I don’t want to see it end if a relationship causes problems.”

“That’s fine,” Bolo said with a sporty laugh.

“Hey, if you start asking out other women, try to work on your trance problem first,” Sky suggested. “I’m not sure how many people can really tolerate their boyfriend getting lovestruck by another person every five seconds.”

Bolo let out a sigh. “Yeah…” he whispered.

“So, you staying?” Risky asked Sky, who gave a hesitant nod.

“For now anyway,” Sky replied.

“Good,” Risky said, smirking. “Now you can get me my drink.”

Sky and Bolo groaned simultaneously. *Forgot about that,* Sky thought.

Shantae and Rotty were about to exit Water Town when a sudden realization struck the half-Genie. “I should probably check up on Bolo,” Shantae murmured, pulling out her phone. “Oh… right.” She placed the phone back in her pocket.

“What’s wrong?” Rotty asked.

“Phone’s dead,” Shantae answered. “I… forgot to charge it.”

“Use mine,” Rotty offered, pulling out her own phone.

“Thanks,” Shantae stated, dialing Bolo’s number.

“So, besides Hedgehog, who else do you call a friend?”

“Not including my uncle?” Shantae wondered, putting the phone away. “I don’t have a lot of friends. I guess there’s that little kid in my town, Mia. She’s always been nice to me. The only other person I’d

call a friend would be Sky. She's been there since we were kids. Same with Bolo." She bit her lip, wanting to say Harmony. *I hope I can call her one soon.* She turned her head to Rottytops. "I appreciate all you've done for me, but I don't really know you that well. I can't really call you a friend just yet."

Rotty comfortably placed her hands behind her head. "I get it. But you can ask me anything. I'm an open book," Rotty replied with a grin. "Well, mostly a blank one but still open."

Shantae chuckled at the joke. "What are your brothers like?" she then asked. "And do you remember your parents at all?"

"That's a no on the second question," Rotty answered. "Abner, he's well… protective. Not overkill, but he cares about me. If I had to describe his default mood, it would be tired, even with coffee." Rotty giggled a bit. "He still knows how to smile though. He won't say it out loud, but he likes architecture a lot. Like, modeling houses. He's pretty insistent on where stuff should be put."

"You said he's protective," Shantae pointed out. "What did you mean by that?'

"He'll just text me every now and again, making sure I'm ok," Rotty explained with a small smile. "It's nice."

Shantae smiled brightly. "I'm glad he cares." Her pointy ears perked up as a new thought entered her head. "Hey, how come you didn't just look at your phones to learn your old name?"

"Well, they kinda got wrecked in the crash. So, we had to get new ones."

"Hmm…" Shantae murmured. "What's your other brother like?"

"Poe? He was the one who got me into comic books," Rotty explained, making Shantae's eyes widen with excitement. "I got into this old series recently. Desert Blaze."

"I read that!" Shantae said, grinning from ear to ear. "It's so good, especially for its time!"

“Yeah. I cried when it ended,” Rotty said, lowering her head slightly. Shantae raised an eyebrow, trying to recollect the ending. “I really didn’t expect Doreen to die.”

“...What?” Shantae asked, her voice breaking. “I don’t remember that.”

“You don’t?’ Rotty asked.

“Ah!” Shantae screamed, clasping her hands to her head. “I never finished it!”

“Sorry…” Rotty murmured, wincing. “I didn’t realize…”

Shantae sighed, rubbing her tense shoulders. “It’s fine.”

“Is it really?” Rotty asked, tilting her head forward.

“No.”

“Eh… want me to keep telling you about Poe?” Rotty asked sheepishly.

“Sure,” Shantae said sluggishly.

“Well, Poe is the builder among us,” Rotty explained. “He made the horse carriage we ride in.”

“You ride in a horse carriage?” Shantae asked.

“Yeah, it’s like a home on wheels,” Rotty explained. “At least until we find a good spot to make for an actual home.”

“I’m sure there’s some housing in Scuttle Town,” Shantae suggested. “I could put in a good word for you.”

Rotty grinned. “Thanks,” she said. “Let’s get back to Poe for a second, shall we?” Shantae nodded in response. “Poe’s good with making stuff that involves wood. He made me a ramp for a skateboard he bought me. He’s a bit more encouraging than Abner is.”

“Why is that?” Shantae asked.

“Poe says we should live life the best we can. Abner thinks we should be careful not to get hurt.”

“Wait, can you guys feel pain?” Shantae asked.

“Not physically,” Rotty stated. “But I don’t think we can regenerate or anything like that. We heal the same way everybody else does. So, if we got splattered, we’d still be alive, just in more places than one.”

Shantae shuddered. “I really don’t want to ever become immortal.”

“Yeah, I can see why that’d suck,” Rotty agreed with a chuckle.

“Hey, what did Abner mean when he said you’d get hurt?” Shantae questioned.

“Well, we’re immortal, so we’ll be here forever. Everybody else, not so much.”

“He doesn’t want you to get too attached to people,” Shantae guessed.

“Yeah, he never really sticks around to talk to anybody besides me and Poe,” Rotty explained. “Honestly, I haven’t really had any friends since I became a zombie. I can’t remember if I even had any friends before that. You’re the longest conversation I’ve had since Mimic.”

“Is that why you’re so friendly with me?” Shantae asked. “Because you want a friend?’

“Maybe,” Rotty replied. “I don’t really know. This is just how I act with people. I’ve tried talking to the people I buy coffee from, but they’re usually not in a chatting mood. A lot of people get weirded out looking at me. They think I’m going to eat them or something. I think the shop owners only stand me because I have money.” Her head hung shamefully as she said the last three sentences. “Hey, mind if I ask you a question?” she asked, trying to regain her composure.

Shantae shook her head. “Go ahead.”

“What’s it like, being a half-Genie?” Rotty asked, which made Shantae tense up. “Oh, is that a sensitive topic?”

Shantae sighed. “A little, yeah, but I guess I can still tell you.” She took a deep breath. “Everybody goes nuts about Genies, especially since they’re pretty rare these days. It’s exhausting. A lot of people in town expect me to be amazing rather than just another person like they are. I guess it’s my fault.”

“What do you mean?” Rotty asked.

“When I was a kid, Mimic told me I was a half-Genie. I got excited since the kids in town told stories about Genies. They said they were magical heroes who protected the Earth, and getting to see one was rare. I was so excited by it all I told them my mom was a Genie, so I was a Genie. I thought it would make me sound cooler to be a full Genie. They asked to see my magic and…” Shantae gripped her shins, her fingers tensing up. “...I couldn’t do it. I didn’t have any magic at the time and until yesterday, I wasn’t sure I’d ever have any. I thought my hair whip was magic, but Mimic told me it came from my dad, who’s human.”

“Wait, hair whip?” Rotty questioned.

“Oh, yeah. I can do a whip with my hair.” She spun around, making sure to avoid Rotty. She pulled her head back and lunged it forward, whipping the air with her ponytail.

“Woah. Are you sure that isn’t magic?” Rotty asked, slightly mystified.

“It’s not,” Shantae sighed. “I didn’t know I could do it at the time, so I couldn’t show them it. And when I could do it, the town just got bored by it after a while.”

“What happened with the kids?” Rotty asked.

“I told them it would take a while for my magic to grow and it was probably different from the other Genies. Some of the kids listened to me and others said I was just trying to get attention. They said a Genie without magic was probably weaker than a regular person.”

“Yeesh. How did you deal with them?” Rotty questioned.

“Bolo and Sky backed me up at the time,” Shantae answered. “Sky said to the other kids that even if I was powerless, I was still stronger than all of them. And Bolo said I had taught him how to fight, and he could kick all their butts.”

“Did you actually?” Rotty asked, genuinely curious.

Shantae chuckled. “It was the other way around, actually. I didn’t even know who Bolo or Sky were at the time, so you can imagine I appreciated it.”

“Sounds like some good friends,” Rotty agreed. “What happened after that?”

“As I got older, people still expected me to have more magic. They still do.” Her face drooped a bit. “And about a year ago, Sky left Scuttle Town to live on her own.”

“Why?” Rotty asked.

“She couldn’t stand her mom,” Shantae answered. “I never really talked to her mom, so I don’t know what the story is there. And Bolo, he lived in Scuttle Town until a couple years ago. His grandma was getting sick and wanted to move back home. Water Town was where Bolo was born, so he went back to take care of his granny. He doesn’t really know his parents.”

“I’m amazed you three managed to keep in contact,” Rotty admitted.

“Some things never change, I guess,” Shantae said, her lips slowly curving upward. “Let’s call Bolo before we lose track of things.”

“Put it on speaker,” Rotty suggested.

“Uh… that might not be a good idea,” Shantae murmured.

“Why?”

Shantae sighed. “Mimic said not to tell Sky you’re a zombie. I don’t know why.”

“I’m not going to eat her or anything. Me and my brothers are like the only zombies with actual brains anyway,” Rotty replied.

“Still, I want to be careful. Sky might have a panic attack or something.”

Rotty sighed. “I’ll be careful, but I want to meet her sometime. I’m not that bad,” she giggled. “You know that better than anyone.”

“That is surprisingly true,” Shantae admitted. “I’ll put it on speaker so you can hear, but watch what you say.”

Emma slept against the wooden floor of her home, Wobble Bell resting his head against hers. A loud knock awakened her and her pet. Wobble Bell rolled over, shaking his entire body before yawning. Emma patted him on the head, prompting the dog to start licking her hand. Emma grinned before standing up. She could hear another knock on the door. “Coming!” she shouted, rushing to the door. Wobble Bell pursued her, coming to a halt at the door. Emma yanked the door open, seeing three guests. “Are you guys looking for some food?” she asked eagerly. *Did Harmony recommend this place around? That would be so nice of her!*

Bolo’s jaw dropped, becoming hypnotized by her face.

Sky sighed, covering her embarrassed face with her hands. *Not again…*

Risky glanced at Bolo. *Does this guy find every girl he sees pretty?* she wondered. *Actually, no. He doesn’t like bird girl over here.* She shook her head, silently groaning. *Why am I even wondering about this?*

Emma took notice of Bolo’s trance. “Is he okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, he gets like this,” Sky said, taking her hands off her face. “Whenever he sees a girl he finds pretty, his brain freezes.”

Emma blushed instantly. “Awww,” she said, smiling while covering her cheeks. “Thanks, dude. I’m Emma, by the way.”

Bolo shook his head until he returned to reality. “Y-yeah,” he murmured.

“So, you guys want something to eat? Maybe a drink too?” Emma asked.

“I’d like something to eat,” Bolo stated nervously.

“I could go for a drink,” Risky stated.

“That I can manage,” Emma said with a grin, spinning around. “I can get you some coffee if you like.”

“That works,” Risky replied.

Sky let out a yawn. “I guess I’ll take a cup.”

“Two coffees coming up,” Emma said, going to the kitchen area in the back of the room.

Wobble Bell ran up to Risky and began licking her leg. Risky bent down and scratched behind his ears, a small smile forming on the pirate’s lips. Wobble Bell wagged his tail and began standing on two legs, wrapping his front paws around Risky’s hand. The pirate petted the dog on the head, instilling a form of peace in her mind.

“You like dogs?” Bolo asked.

Risky shrugged, petting underneath the dog’s chin.

Emma returned, holding a metal tray. On it were two mugs of coffee as well as a donut on the left. “Here you go!” she said eagerly.

Sky took her mug, as did Risky when she had stood up, much to Wobble Bell’s dismay. The dog whined a bit before going to find a small bag. Picking it up with his teeth, he raced out the open door.

“Where’s he going?” Bolo asked.

“Oh, he’s just going for his walk. He comes back after he’s done doing his stuff,” Emma explained. “He knows what he’s doing.”

Bolo looked at the tray, finding a glazed donut sitting there. He picked it up and began munching on it. “This is pretty good,” Bolo admitted between bites as Emma put the tray down.

“Thank you!” Emma said, clasping her hands together. A previous thought re-entered her mind. “Oh, hey. Did a girl named Harmony recommend this place to you?”

Bolo paused, accidentally choking on the donut in the process.

Emma’s eyes widened in terror, racing behind him. She wrapped her arms around his waist, thrusting her hands against him until he finally coughed up the chunk of donut. “Are you okay?” she asked worriedly, putting a hand on his back.

“Yeah,” Bolo murmured, rubbing the spit off his mouth. “Thanks.”

“What… just happened?” Sky murmured. She had seen Bolo choking but before she could even respond or try to help him, a pink flash had dashed past her eyes and Bolo was good as new almost instantly.

“It seems chef girl here knows about Harmony,” Risky whispered to Sky.

“Hey, you said Harmony,” Bolo stated, pointing to Emma. “Did she have red hair?”

“Yeah, I met her yesterday,” Emma answered. “My first ever customer,” she said, smiling proudly. A light bulb lit in her head. “Oh! I forgot! You guys can pay, right?” she asked, tapping her fingers nervously.

“I’ll take care of it,” Sky offered.

Emma grinned. “Thanks.” She returned her attention to Bolo. “How do you guys know Harmony?”

“It’s a long story,” Risky stated, crossing her arms.

“She might be in trouble,” Bolo explained. “See, she’s a half-Genie…”

“Wait, a half-Genie?” Emma asked, her eyes widening.

“Yeah. It’s the kid of a Genie and a human,” Bolo explained casually.

“I asked her if she was a Genie. She kind of dodged the question,” Emma stated. “She had fixed my door like it was nothing.”

“Well, there’s this evil voice that can get into people’s heads and he got into hers,” Bolo continued. “But she doesn’t know he’s evil. He’s trying to make her think he’s a good guy.”

“Is this voice magical or something?” Emma asked worriedly.

Risky inched herself a bit closer. *How is this girl so trusting? She’s not doubting us or anything. Is she that dumb… or is she playing us?*

Sky was having similar thoughts herself. *I don’t know who’s more gullible. Bolo or this chick. It’s good she trusts us, but what if that pirate convinces her next time?*

“The voice does have magic,” Risky stated. “Although he tends to prefer dark magic more than anything.”

“There’s a dark magic?” Emma questioned. “I just thought it was magic. Wait, how do you even know this guy?”

“He was my boss,” Risky answered.

Don’t listen to them, a voice warned her.

“Who’s there?” Emma asked out loud, looking around.

“*Great* ,” Risky groaned. *He got in her head through me.*

Harmony is in trouble, the voice spoke. *These people are enemies to her parents. They are trying to take her away from her friends, like you and I.*

“Who even are you?” Emma questioned.

“Don’t listen to him,” Risky warned. “He ruined Harmony’s life. He’s

the reason her parents are dead."

"What?!" Bolo asked, balling his fists while Sky's expression went from confused to enraged.

"He killed her parents?!" Sky shouted angrily.

She's not telling the full story, the voice stated to Emma. *I'm Harmony's caretaker. I knew her parents. I could answer any questions you want to know. These three can't. Because they don't know Harmony like I do.*

"Uh…" Emma murmured, rubbing her hands nervously. "I feel like you're throwing a lot at me right now."

"Get out of her head, old man," Risky demanded, gritting her teeth.

"Maybe I should hear both sides," Emma suggested.

Inquisitive. I respect that, the voice spoke. *Very well. Hear what these three have to say. Then, I will seek you out. If you would be so kind, please forgive my impulsivity. It's a bad habit of mine. Anyway, see you soon.*

Emma's body shivered, seeing a small puff of smoke exiting her mouth. The gas dissipated in the air, leaving no trace of its presence. "I think he's gone," she said.

He's completely out of mind tricks for now, Risky thought. *He's getting desperate to pull that trick on her.*

"Are you okay?" Bolo asked.

Emma shook her head. "What was that voice? It felt like a corpse talking to me," she whimpered.

"My boss," Risky answered. "What was he telling you?"

"He was trying to make me join him. He said you guys were trying to take Harmony away from her friends, like him and I," Emma explained frantically. "When I told him I should hear both sides, he respected that and said to hear your side before he returns."

Risky sighed. “Guess that adds another person I have to explain things to,” she muttered.

“What is he?” Emma asked, shaking slightly. “I feel like that could have gone a lot worse. Like he was holding back from trying to kill me.”

“That’s gonna take a while to explain,” Risky stated. “I’m… sorry you had to be roped into this.”

“I just want to know what’s going on,” Emma said, slowly regaining her composure. “If that thing is hurting Harmony, we have to tell her.”

“That’s why I’m planning to find her after I explain everything. She’ll probably listen to you since she knows you.”

Emma nodded. “Let’s hear it.”

Wobble Bell walked into the home, holding in his teeth the bag from earlier. The bag was no longer empty and had actually been tied up. Sky blinked in disbelief, seeing the dog toss the bag into the trash can. “How did he do all that?” she asked, turning to Emma.

“Oh, he’s just smart like that,” Emma said with a happy little shrug.

“He managed to *tie* that bag,” Sky pointed out, exasperated. “ *How?* ”

Emma shrugged. “I guess he’s *really* smart?”

Sky sighed. *This weirdness will never end, will it?*

A buzzing sound began ringing from Bolo’s pocket. He pulled out his phone and looked at the number. “Don’t recognize that one,” he said, letting it ring all the way until it finished. “Probably just a scam. Not falling for that again. Last time they got me to buy a bunch of expired chocolate. The worst part was that I knew it was expired, but they told me it tasted better than when it’s fresh.”

“I hate when that happens,” Emma replied, making Sky do a double take.

Does she speak from experience? Sky question. *Well, it's not like-*

"That chocolate made me sick," Emma continued.

Never mind.

"Well, at least I know now not to do that with my cooking," Emma said with a giggle, trying to drown out the bad memories.

The phone rang again, being the same number as well. Bolo groaned, picking it up. "Look, I don't want any."

"Bolo, it's me!" A familiar voice called out.

"Shantae?" Sky asked.

"Nah, it can't be her," Bolo assumed. "This is one of those new robot voices. They mimic the voice of someone you know so they can scam you. They've gotten a few bucks out of me before."

"...What?" Shantae said over the line.

Sky noticed Emma opening her mouth. *Please don't say it.*

"That sucks," Emma commented.

Ok, good.

"I hate when that happens."

Oh, come on!

Chapter 12

Chapter 12

Harmony searched through the kitchen, looking through the pantries cupboard by cupboard. *Is there anything here to eat?* she wondered.

There might be a few cans that are still good, Jack spoke to her.

Harmony continued searching the cabinets, finding a couple of cans. She studied the label and picture on the can. *Beans,* the half-Genie thought. A small creaking sound made Harmony's ear twitch, making her spin around. A Tinkerbat stood before her, or rather, it did. Harmony's sudden movements had startled the poor creature, making it fall flat on its butt.

What is that? Harmony wondered.

Oh, that's Dave, Jack replied.

You know him? Harmony questioned.

I know everyone who's ever worked for me.

Harmony noticed the Tinkerbat was rubbing its stomach with a sorrowful stare at its gut. The half-Genie bent down, startling Dave even more. "Hey, it's ok. I'm not gonna hurt you." She held out the can of beans, making the Tinkerbat lean forward. "You want it?" The Tinkerbat nodded furiously, making Harmony smile. "Here." She carefully handed over the can, making Dave's invisible expression brighten up.

Aren't you hungry? Jack asked.

There's probably more food somewhere. And I'm not that *hungry,* Harmony replied. She then began to think to herself, shutting Jack off from her thoughts. *Why am I being so nice to him? There's no telling what he actually wants.* She sighed.

Something wrong? Jack asked.

I… don't know, Harmony thought. *I barely know you or what you even want… but I just keep ignoring that and I don't know why.*

You want somebody you can trust, Jack assumed. *I don't blame you. The world is a cruel place, and for many, the only consolation is the company of another.*

Tell me something, Harmony asked. *When you get free, what are you going to do?*

An excellent question, Jack replied with a hearty laugh. *There are a multitude of things I wish to do when I am free. The first will be to visit my wife and daughter, assuming they're still alive.*

You have a family? Harmony asked in surprise.

Before I was confined to that prison, I had one. They were the most beautiful people in my life.

What were their names?

My wife had a very cute name. One you wouldn't see too often. Iris.

That is a nice name, Harmony agreed. *And your daughter?*

We named her after my mother. Nora. She takes more after her mother in appearance.

How old would Nora be now?

Hm… let me think. If memory serves… about fifteen. Six years off from you.

How did you and Iris meet?

Another tale you wish to hear? Jack laughed. *I guess that would put our story in chronological order. I was about thirty. Same as Iris. She was not my first love, but she was the most memorable one. I was a gem collector. Find the rarest gem and sell it for profit. I had a friend named Mimic I worked with. He was quite the scientist. Learned how*

to duplicate small objects, such as gems. You can imagine the fortune we made together. He'd make copies and I would sell them. For people who didn't believe the rarity of the stone, we would put on a little show where we'd convince people it had great powers. Mimic's technology allowed a convincing illusion.

You were con artists? Harmony asked.

Well… yes. I'm sure you're disappointed in me.

Harmony shrugged. *You're not doing it now, right?*

I don't have a choice, but if I did I wouldn't.

Had a feeling, Harmony thought with a sly grin *. Nobody's perfect.*

Yes… as I was saying…

A middle-aged man walked into a tent in the desert, holding a burlap sack over his back. The man had black hair and wore a white cap that kept the sun out of his eyes as he worked. "Got a decent haul," Jack said, dropping the sack onto the ground.

An older man with grey hair and yellow gloves was tinkering with a small device on his wooden desk. "How much did you get?"

"Over a hundred gems," Jack stated, confidently crossing his arms.

Mimic chuckled. "Even if some of them aren't rare, we'll get a decent bid on them with your skills."

"I want to keep this one," Jack said, holding a purple crystal. "I don't know why, but I like it."

"You want me to at least duplicate it?" Mimic offered.

"Maybe if I see a pretty gal around," Jack replied, stuffing the crystal into a green box and entering several buttons for a code. "She'd like it too."

“Looking for some love?” Mimic assumed.

“Wouldn’t hurt,” Jack replied before being tossed back two purple crystals. “You up for a round of cards?”

Mimic stood up from his desk and stretched his arms. “A nice change of pace, I suppose.”

“Just don’t cheat again with that machine,” Jack stated. “I know you copy your cards.”

“You finally noticed, hm?” Mimic said, smirking. “Guess that couldn’t last forever.”

“When you’re betting money, it helps to pay attention,” Jack retorted. He turned his head to see Mimic’s machine was no longer on his desk. “Heya. Where’d your doo-hickey go?’

“Hm?” Mimic turned around and panicked. “Where is it?! That took years to make! It’ll take years to make another!”

Jack walked outside the tent, seeing a woman dash through the desert in front of them. He pulled out a small gun and pulled the trigger, making the woman crumple to the floor. Mimic jumped as soon as he heard the trigger puller.

“You didn’t kill her, did you?!” Mimic asked worriedly. “We don’t need the law getting involved in this.”

Jack shook his head. “No. Just a little magic bullet I picked up at a market recently. Expensive little thing, but it gets the job done. Relatively harmless. She won’t be able to walk for about an hour, but she’ll be fine.” Jack pulled out a pair of binoculars to eye the thief. “And from what I can see, she is a *fine* woman too.” The woman began crawling, trying to still make her departure with the box. “I’ll take care of it,” Jack replied, dashing towards her. He stopped in his tracks when he reached her. “Howdy,” he said, bending down to greet her.

The woman was not human like Jack was. She had pale white skin and wore a silk dress. From what Jack could see, she had a purple lobster tail peeking below her dress. The woman had attanae

popping up from her white hair. She was holding onto the box still while her eyes locked with Jack's. She chuckled and clutched the box tighter. "You have a *unique* way of introducing yourself to a woman."

"If you're gonna do something, might as well do it right," Jack laughed with her. "I'm gonna need that box back."

"What are you willing to offer in return?" the woman asked deviously. "I can still move my arms and you do *not* want to see what my fangs can do."

"How about a date?" Jack offered, confusing the woman.

"Wait… what?"

"I'm kidding. Although you are a pretty woman."

"Thanks. So really, what do you want to offer in return?"

"I could give you half our haul," Jack offered.

"A bit much for a box, don't you think?" the woman asked. "I don't even know what this thing does. And yet you're offering half your load to me."

"Think of it as an appreciation of your skills," Jack replied. "Never have I seen anyone sneak up on us before like that. It's impressive. You could come work with us."

"What's it pay?"

"It depends. Mostly on my charisma, really. We find gems. Sell 'em if they're rare or if people are dumb enough to buy 'em. Based on what little I know of you, you could certainly put on a show. Know any fancy tricks?"

"A few," the woman replied. "Your offer's pretty tempting. But why trust me so quickly? I could easily just stab you in the back."

"I may have a bit of a bias here," Jack chuckled.

“You find me pretty,” the woman assumed, laughing with him.

“Yeah, that’s basically it. But I find ya pretty for more than just your looks. Your skills and personality, I like too. Even more than your looks.” He pulled out one of the purple crystals and handed it to the woman. “You could wear it as a necklace if you like. Free of charge.”

“I’d appreciate it if I could walk,” the woman replied, smirking. Jack nodded, pulling out his gun again. The woman’s eyes squeezed shut in terror before she was harmlessly shot again. This time, the feeling in her legs returned. “Thanks,” she said, handing over the box.

“Appreciate it,” Jack stated. “So will you be joining us?”

“I’ll think about it,” the woman stated.

“Since you’ve been so nice, I’ll tell you my name. Jack,” he said with a toothy grin.

The woman grinned right back at Jack. “Iris.”

I wasn’t expecting that, Harmony admitted. *Although, I guess I should have.*

A con artist and a thief. I found it to be a very fitting pairing.

A lot less wholesome than my parents, Harmony observed.

Very much so, Jack agreed with her. *That ends the first chapter of my adventure. Care to hear some more?*

After a few questions, Harmony replied. *It’s been bugging me for a while. Do any of your other plans have to do with the half-Genies like me or Shantae?*

Jack let out a depressive sigh, one that sent a shiver down Harmony’s spine. *At one point, I did. I wanted to do something horrible to the two of you. All because of something I cannot control. I wanted to drain you both of your powers and leave nothing behind. Being around you helps me to control my temper and bury the urges*

for a while longer. When I am free, I want somebody like Shantae or yourself to… Jack's voice quietly stopped.

To what? Harmony winced.

To make me atone for my sins. I am a dangerous man and one easily addicted to power. There is only one cure for me. Picking up that crystal was the greatest mistake of my life. It belonged to the Genies and I didn't realize it. It has irreversible effects on non-Genies.

What do you mean?

It varies from person to person. For one, their skin could slowly peel off. Or there could be an amplification of negative traits, such as greed. The last case I saw was paralysis..

Harmony shuddered. *Seems you speak from experience.*

Jack sighed. *I do. The former two were what I've been afflicted with. My wife… was paralyzed by that crystal. And I… I was the one who gave it to her. It wasn't until Nora was born that Iris began to truly feel the effects of the paralysis. It's a miracle the magic didn't affect Nora.*

Why does that crystal affect non-Genies like that? And how did it even end up on Earth? Harmony questioned.

I don't know why it affects us the way that it did. Jack's voice suddenly became more aggressive. *All I know is who the idiot was that ruined our lives. Neither I nor Serena knew this originally, but a Genie had brought that crystal to Earth to wear for a date with a human. She had believed it romantic for some reason to have the date in the same desert where Mimic and I worked. She had taken her crystal necklace off and forgotten to bring it back. What's worse is she had been warned not to take stuff like that out of the Genie Realm. And that was when I eventually found it. That was when everything turned to ruin.*

Who was this woman?

I've mentioned her before. I tried to be courteous about her since

you didn't know what she had done. She… is Shantae's mother. Ana.

Harmony gasped, losing her breath. *Please tell me you're lying. Please tell me it wasn't her. That she wasn't* that *stupid.*

Oh, I wish I were. But... I'm not. And here we are.

The front door shook slightly, making Harmony's ears perk up. "What was that?" she asked out loud. The doorknob twisted and contorted until the door opened slowly. An elderly woman, holding onto a cane for stability, struggled to walk in.

"My back…" the elderly woman whimpered, unable to pick herself up. She saw Harmony standing above her. "Please… don't hurt me," she begged.

Harmony shook her head. "I won't. I promise." She bent down and picked up the woman's cane, handing it to the woman. She then helped the woman pick herself up.

"W-why… are you here?" the woman asked. "This cottage isn't meant for strangers."

"I'm sorry," Harmony apologized. "I was guided here by somebody who knew my parents. By chance, did you know a couple named Serena and Aaron?"

"Yes, I did," the woman answered with a weak nod. "You look like her. Serena. Are you a niece or something?"

"I… I'm her daughter." The woman dropped her cane once again, prompting Harmony to quickly catch the cane and the woman before she fell once more. "Are you okay?!" Harmony asked in a terrified tone.

"You're… Harmony." the woman murmured, wrapping her arms around the half-Genie. Once again, Harmony had this feeling inside of her. A warmth she couldn't describe, but it reminded her of the happiness she felt when Shantae had done the same. "Their daughter," the woman stated, breaking from the embrace. And like with Shantae, Harmony wished the hug had gone on a bit longer.

“Are you my grandma?”

The woman chuckled. “On your dad’s side, yeah. Where have you been? I haven’t seen you or your folks in decades. Where are they?”

“It’s a long story. I don’t fully understand it either,” Harmony replied. “Oh! You haven’t seen or heard from Plink, have you? She’d be about twelve years old by now.”

“Plink? Who’s that?”

“My sister.”

“You… don’t have a sister.”

A moistness surrounded Harmony’s eyes as a single tear rolled down her cheek. “...What?”

Chapter 13

Chapter 13

“You’ve got some weird friends,” Rotty whispered, having listened to everything on speaker.

Shantae groaned. “Bolo, it’s actually me. Shantae.”

“Shantae? Is it really you?” Bolo asked over the line.

“YES!” Shantae shouted before she immediately covered her mouth, wondering where that sudden burst of anger had come from. “Sorry…”

“Shantae,” Sky’s voice came over. “We’ve run into a bit of a trap. Risky’s boss can listen to whatever we’re saying, so don’t drop any important info.”

“We’ve formed a truce,” a third voice interjected. “One to keep my boss in check.”

“Risky?” Shantae asked, genuinely shocked. “You’re on our side?”

“Our goals align with one another. We both want to keep Harmony safe. And we both want to get rid of my boss.”

“You know Harmony?” Shantae replied.

“My boss kept her trapped in a dream world her entire life.” Shantae’s fists clenched. “Nothing she experienced until she woke up was real.” Shantae grit her teeth, doing her best not to get angry. “ I find it only fair that she knows the truth. Right now, my boss has been feeding whatever lie will convince her to join him. We need to get her away from him before she starts acting in his name.”

“I… I… augh!” Shantae screamed, no longer able to contain her rage. “What kind of monster does that to a person?!”

“I don’t like it much either,” Risky agreed. “That’s why we’re going to

find her while you find the rest of those stones. Make sure to keep those stones safe. I've got an idea for them."

"Risky… I just can't believe you're doing this. That you're actually helping us," Shantae stated, her spirits slowly picking back up. "Thank you!"

"Don't mention it. Now… get those stones." The phone hung up.

"Who's Risky?" Rotty asked, slightly perplexed.

"Somebody working for that evil guy we need to stop. Or, used to work for."

"Oh. Ok. Ready to go to the village?"

Shantae nodded. "Let's hurry."

"Well first, we're going to need a stick."

"Why?" Shantae asked.

"To draw a circle in the sand. That's the first step," Rotty explained. "So, go get a stick."

Shantae groaned. "Fine."

"You guys have some crazy adventures up ahead," Emma commented while she petted Wobble Bell.

"That's putting it mildly," Sky sighed.

"It's been like that the past couple of days," Bolo agreed.

"Do you want some food to take with you?" Emma offered. "I'm a little low on ingredients but I can still make something for you."

"Catch," Risky stated, pulling out a small bag and tossing it to Emma.

"Wow!" Emma exclaimed, opening the bag and finding gems of high

value in terms of currency. “This’ll keep me from starving for a few months! Where did you get all this money?’

“I stole it,” Risky said with a shrug.

“Oh,” Emma murmured. “I can’t take this then.”

“I stole it from my boss. Given all he’s done, I view it as karma.”

“Hm… I guess I can take it,” Emma concluded. She bent down to scratch Wobble Bell behind the ears. “You hear that, Wobble Bell? You’re getting better tasting food soon!” The dog wagged its tail excitedly, licking Emma repeatedly while the teenager giggled.

“Awfully generous of you,” Sky observed.

“It was more to screw with my boss,” Risky admitted. “But she has been rather kind to us.”

“Hey, could you guys recommend my shop around?” Emma asked. “I could really use the business.”

“Sure,” Bolo replied. “The food here is pretty good.”

“Thanks, dude,” Emma said with a smile, making Bolo blush. “Stay safe, ok?”

Bolo nodded. “I will.”

“So, how are we supposed to find Harmony?”

“She’s probably left the forest by now,” Risky assumed. “If I had to guess, she’s probably out on the sea with him. Sky, can you fly us out there?”

“Yeah,” Sky replied. “Let’s get out of here before it hits sundown.”

Risky and Bolo nodded. The trio headed out but on the way out, Bolo suddenly bumped into a young woman with orange hair. “Sorry. Didn’t see you there,” Bolo murmured, watching the woman regain her balance.

“It’s quite alright. Tell me. This shop. Is it any good?” the woman asked.

“Good donut shop,” Bolo answered proudly.

“A bit late for a donut, but I am hungry, so it’ll do. Thank you for the recommendation.” She walked past the trio, making Risky and Sky eye her as she walked in.

“Who was that?” Sky asked.

“I don’t know, but the way she talks sounds egotistical,” Risky observed.

“Really? I didn’t notice,” Bolo commented.

“Of course you didn’t. You probably found her pretty,” Risky replied.

“But… I didn’t.”

“Hm… that’s a first,” Risky noticed.

Inside the restaurant, Emma had returned to her cooking and had been oblivious to the woman until the woman had made a loud “ahem” sound that caught her attention. “Oh, hello! How’d you find the place?”

“Saw it and somebody recommended it to me,” the woman replied.

“Oh! That was fast!” Emma stated, clasping her hands together. “So, what’ll it be?”

“A donut and some directions. Have you ever been to Scuttle Town?”

Emma let out a sigh. “Yeah. My dad and I used to live there. I didn’t really like it there.”

“Is there something wrong with your dad?” the woman asked.

“Just kinda pushy,” Emma stated. “I wanted to be a chef. He wanted me to be enroll in the military like he did. We always argued about

dumb stuff. So, I moved out. And… well, you see where we are."

"I'm sorry to hear that," the woman apologized.

"Don't be. It's not your fault. Anyway, who should I make this order out to, Miss…?"

"Lingerbean. But you can just call me Holly. Everybody who knows me does."

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Vera asked, standing to the side of her younger sister. Nora was on the floor, drawing a circle using a stick of chalk around the trio.

"Eh, fifty-fifty," Nora said with a shrug, finishing the circle. She drew a small square in the center and then an even smaller triangle inside the square. "Wait… was it supposed to be an oval or a circle?"

"Circle," Molly said, reading the book Nora had made her hold. "Why would that Genie leave a map to this village, anyway?"

"I think it was to allow people to reconnect with their loved ones," Nora said, standing up. "You guys ready?"

A knock on the door startled the trio. Nora became even more nervous when the door opened. "What are you three doing?" Agnes asked before she raised an eyebrow, seeing the chalk circle. "What is that?"

"We can explain!" Nora said quickly.

"I doubt it's anything good," Agnes sighed. "Is this… witchcraft? Or, am I just not with the times?"

"Both?" Nora said sheepishly.

Agnes groaned, walking into the room. "Molly, what's going on?"

"Well, that's a long story," Molly stated.

“We’re trying to find my mother,” Vera spoke out, making Agnes’s heart skip a beat. “The one who left me with my dad. I want to know why she did it.”

“Does this circle have to do with the Village of Lost Souls?” Agnes questioned.

“H-how do you know what that is?” Nora asked.

“How do *you* know what that is?” Agnes repeated back. “Nora, you’re fifteen. You’re too young to be doing witchcraft.”

“That implies there’s an *appropriate* age to be doing witchcraft,” Nora observed before receiving a glare. “Sorry. I learned about it from my books. I bought them when we were on vacation a few months ago.”

“Where on Earth do people sell these kinds of books?” Agnes groaned. “That’s not a place you kids should go. I’ve heard stories since I was a kid that of all the places you could go, that is the one you don’t want to be. You could lose yourself if you spend too much time there.”

Vera took a step forward. “Aunt Agnes. I know this won’t make a lot of sense but… I feel like I need to know the truth. If I don’t find an answer at this place, I’ll drop it. I promise. I just need to see if this can lead me anywhere.”

Agnes groaned. “I’ll go for you. How about that? Then I can get the answers for you.”

“That’s not how the system works,” Nora pointed out. “People who enter the village can be heard and seen by their loved ones and other people who entered the village, but not other people’s loved ones. Oh, and I guess the undead can be seen by everyone.”

“ *Fantastic* ,” Agnes murmured.

“If it helps, I’ve created something to keep Vera safe,” Molly offered. “A metal helmet. Nora told me that magic in the village is resistance by metal. If we keep a metal helmet around Vera’s head, she should be able to stay in the village long enough to find her mom.”

“You two think of everything,” Agnes said with a smile. “I didn’t know about the metal thing. But how do we know if it’s accurate?”

“We’re going to have Vera write on her arm so she doesn’t forget she needs to come back before it’s too late. If the helmet fails, the writing is the backup.”

“Aunt Agnes?” Vera asked.

“Yes, Vera?” Agnes replied.

“Why are you doing this? You seemed so scared just a few minutes ago, and now you’re helping us.”

Agnes sighed. “I understand your plight. You want closure. Not to mention, having some magic resistance calms my nerves a bit. If need be, I’ll be there to help scoop you out of the place. We’re a family and we’re going to stick together as one. No matter what.”

“Remember, it’s magic *resistance* , not immunity,” Molly added. “She can only stay in there for so long before the helmet starts to crack and the magic begins to take its effect.”

“That’ll be useful to remember,” Agnes replied before she turned to Vera. “I’m sure you’ve already learned it by now, but you are a Genie. Well, half of one anyway. Iris and I… we kept that a secret from you.”

Vera nodded. “I don’t blame you. A lot of drama seems to come from it.”

“We know the name of your mother. Aja. But that’s about it. She was never around and your father raised you by himself,” Agnes explained. “If you do find her, you may not like what you find. Are you prepared to deal with that?”

Vera nodded. “My opinion on her can’t get much lower.”

“That’s… one to way to view things,” Agnes said sheepishly. “So, how’s this ritual going?”

“Almost done!” Nora explained, showing a detailed design inside the

circle. “While you guys were talking, I finished the circle. Now, we just need some scented candles and to chant some phrases and we can teleport to the entrance.”

“This really does sound like witchcraft,” Agnes groaned.

“I never said it wasn’t,” Nora replied. After getting the supplies set up, Nora began chanting certain phrases not understandable in English. The other three couldn’t understand what she was saying or any meaning behind her words. When she finally finished, she took a deep breath. “Let’s get in. We only have twenty seconds before the teleport starts.”

The quartet gathered around each other, becoming cramped inside the circle. Vera’s cold metal helmet made matters worse, as bumping into it was a freezing shock to Agnes’s system.

“Nora…” Molly grumbled. “Next time… draw a *bigger* circle.”

“He he… sorry,” Nora laughed nervously.

“I hope there isn’t a next time,” Agnes replied.

The quartet appeared suddenly in a new world. A volcanic world with black dust acting as clouds. Everything felt upside down as though they stood on the ceiling and the floor below them was now the new ceiling. A wooden staircase rested above their heads, but from the position that they stood, it would be difficult to reach said staircase. In front of them was a metal door that was left cracked open.

“I guess this is it,” Vera said. “See you when I get back.”

“Vera, just remember to be careful,” Agnes demanded worriedly.

Vera nodded. “I will. I promise.” She dashed towards the door and slid through its opening, but stopped dead in her tracks. She saw two young women standing in front of her, their backs facing her. Both seemed familiar. “Hey Shantae…” the green gal said, tapping the purple-haired girl on the shoulder, having noticed Vera’s presence.

Shantae? She's here too? Vera thought.

Shantae turned around and beamed brightly. "It's you! What are you doing here? Oh! I'm really sorry about earlier!' she exclaimed, clasping her hands together in a panic.

"That's her?" the green woman asked.

That voice. Is it… no. But maybe? Vera took a step forward, getting a better sight of the green woman. Her heart nearly stopped when she saw the zombie's clothing. Everything the zombie wore… she recognized. Even the hairstyle and headband she recognized. The shirt and pants had the occasional tears in it that were ingrained into Vera's memory. A joyful moistness in Vera's eyes made tears drip down her cheeks.

"Hey kid. Is something wrong?" Rotty asked.

"No, it's… it's what's right," Vera murmured, approaching the zombie. "I just… you're alive! It worked!" She wrapped her arms round the zombie, giving her bear hug.

"Uh… do I know you?" Rotty asked.

"You don't remember me?" Vera asked as she backed away, disappointment filling her voice. Her tears were no longer of joy.

"Rotty…" Shantae interjected. "I think… I think she's the reason you're a zombie."

Chapter 14

Chapter 14

One year ago…

A slightly younger Vera collected seashells on the beach. *Nora will like this one,* she thought, collecting a scallop off the ground. *It'll go nice with her hair.* A loud roar rocketed through Vera's ears, making her look up. She squinted her eyes, seeing a small plane racing toward her. The plane had its engines ablaze and was heading into a crash.

Vera shrieked and ran as fast as she could. When the plane hit the beach, metallic debris scattered across the sand, barely missing Vera's head. Vera got knocked down by the shockwave, heading face first into the sand. She coughed out sand as she picked herself up. *Who was flying that plane?*

She saw among the wreckage severely burnt bodies, barely holding onto life. She rushed over towards them, finding that only one of them was conscious: a girl several years older than her. The girl had gray hair and resting next to her seemed to be a broken pair of red-rimmed glasses. Vera bent down to talk to the girl. "Don't worry. It's gonna be ok."

The girl coughed, her voice hoarse. "Doubt it…"

"No, trust me. I can heal people," Vera said, placing her hand against the girl's head.

"I don't think a nurse is gonna help," the girl said hazily.

"I'm not a nurse. I have magic," Vera explained. The girl's body gained a green aura that constantly flickered on and off. Vera let out an exhausted breath. *I've never had to heal someone on the verge of death. This is going to take everything I've got.* The green aura

remained consistent now, allowing Vera to dash towards the two young men that had even less of a chance than the girl. She pressed a hand against each of their heads, letting their bodies glow as the girl's did. *Please… please… I'm begging you. Just make it through this!* she pleaded.

Vera returned back to the girl. "Are my brothers ok?" the girl asked.

"They should be," Vera answered.

"Why did you help me?" the girl asked.

"What?" Vera asked. "If you have the power to help someone, you do it. No matter what. I treat everyone like family, and my family's motto is to stick together."

The girl chuckled, shedding a tear. "You're pretty nice for a kid your age."

Vera beamed. "Thank you."

The girl sighed. "I… I don't think I'm gonna make it."

"Don't think like that," Vera stated. "It'll be fine."

"What's your name?" the girl asked.

"Mine?"

"I don't see anyone else around."

"Vera. Why?"

"I just wanted… to know who tried to save me."

"Can I… ask yours?"

The girl chuckled. "Rosa." Rosa let out a nasty cough, her breathing began to slow. "Well, it's been nice knowing ya."

Vera's eyes widened in terror. "What are you talking about?"

"It's not working."

“No, it is! You have to trust me on-” Vera’s eyes became rivers streaming down her face, seeing the girl’s eyes freeze permanently. Vera panicked, doing what her mother had taught her. She did chest compressions and CPR for Rosa, but nothing changed the result. Rosa’s body had stopped glowing. Vera had failed. *Please don’t go.* She twisted her head in the other direction, seeing the other bodies had stopped glowing as well. Vera broke down into tears, crawling into a fetal position to hide her shame. *Why couldn’t I save them? Now what am I supposed to do? Where am I supposed to put them?*

She noticed the tide was washing over Rosa’s body. *Maybe the water? I don’t know how to even explain this to Mom.* She struggled to drag the bodies over to the ocean, letting them be carried off into the waters. Sadly, she could not do anything about the water in her own eyes. She left the beach, unsure of how to remove the debris. She figured she could inform a lifeguard or somebody nearby about the needed cleanup.

Unbeknownst to Vera, the bodies in the water began to float to the surface. Their bodies’ skin had become a murky green, along with their hair. Rosa was the first to wake up. She gasped for air, but felt no better when she took in some oxygen. In fact, it did not feel like she was breathing at all. She placed her hand at her eyes, feeling for her glasses, but nothing was there. Her vision had surprisingly improved considerably. At least from the very little she could remember. She tried to remember other things, but couldn’t. *What happened?* she wondered. *I feel like I’m missing something. But what?*

“You’re saying my name is Rosa?” Rotty asked, thinking the name over.

Vera nodded. “Yes. I saved you and your brothers from that plane crash. I don’t know how I did it, but I did.”

“Rotty, Rosa. They do sound pretty similar,” Shantae noticed. She turned to Vera. “Wait, you can resurrect people?”

Vera shrugged. “Maybe? I mean, Rosa isn’t really alive. But she’s

not really dead either. I'm not sure I can do it again. Wait, why are you two even here?" She pointed an accusatory finger at Shantae. "Are you following me?"

Shantae quickly shook her head. "No. This was a coincidence. Rotty and I are looking for something important." A new thought popped into Shantae's brain. "That might explain something," she murmured.

"What are you talking about?" Vera asked.

"Why we had that call earlier," Shantae assumed. "Rotty's magic is your magic. And maybe our parents knew each other or something? That could've caused what happened."

"It's possible," Vera slowly agreed.

"Why are you here, anyway?" Rotty asked Vera.

"I want to find my mother," Vera explained. "Ever since Shantae brought her up, it made me want to find her."

Shantae let out a sigh. "Vera, I just… I'm sorry. I barged my way into your life and made you come here."

"You said I was a half-Genie, right?" Vera asked. "How much do you know about them?"

"Not much," Shantae admitted sheepishly. "I know my mom was named Ana and she was kind of an idiot."

Runs in the family, Vera wanted to say, but instead she held her tongue. "What about your dad?"

"His name was Karnov. My uncle says I act a bit more like him than my mom. I don't know what happened to them. If they're even still alive."

"Doesn't that bother you?" Vera asked. "That they just left you without an explanation?"

Shantae shrugged. "I figured if I ever met them again, I'd get an

explanation. I figured they had a good reason to leave."

Vera sighed. "You really assume the best in people, don't you?"

"I just treat people the way I want to be treated," Shantae replied. "That's why I try to give everyone a chance. Even if I could easily just hate them. And there are plenty of people in town I could easily hate."

"What do you mean?" Vera asked.

"I guess you haven't experienced it," Shantae assumed. "Since I'm part Genie, everyone expects stuff from me. They think I can just magic away their problems. The mayor was literally going to give me my job just because I'm a Genie."

"What?" Rotty and Vera said simultaneously.

"That mayor is treating you like a tourist attraction," Rotty observed. "Why would you even take a job from him?"

"I wanted to help my uncle with the bills," Shantae explained. "He's taken care of me all my life. I figured it was only fair to return the favor."

"That's very kind of you," Vera interjected, startling Shantae.

"T-thank you," Shantae murmured.

I think I'm beginning to understand her better, Vera thought. "Shantae, are there any other half-Genies like us?"

"Just one," Shantae stated. "A girl named Harmony. I met her the other day. We're trying to rescue her from this demon that's manipulating her."

That must be the girl in the book, Vera thought. "Wait, an actual demon?" she questioned. "How *weird* are your lives?"

"Well, he sounded like one," Shantae explained. "That's why we need to get the Elemental Stone out of here. Before one of his minions finds this place and takes it. The stone keeps him sealed

away from this world, but he can still communicate with Harmony."

"We should probably hurry and get in there," Rotty suggested. "We can only be in the village for a short period of time."

Shantae nodded. "You're right. Hey, you want to come with us?" she asked Vera. "We can only get inside with somebody who's not alive, and Rotty fits the bill."

"Oh, right," Vera nodded. *I completely forgot about that part.*

"Hey, now that I think about it, why do you have that helmet on you?" Rotty asked.

"Oh yeah, I totally missed that," Shantae stated, now noticing the helmet.

"It's to help preserve my memories. Metal helmets resist the memory wipe here."

"Huh, never knew that," Rotty commented.

"I wish I knew that," Shantae groaned. "Do you have a spare?"

"Not off hand," Vera stated.

"Never mind," Shantae sighed. "Let's do this."

The trio walked forward, making their way to the entrance. The guard in front of the door was a humanoid ant-like creature that wore a dark hood. "Who goes there?" The ant asked in an ominous tone.

"I've got some fresh meat to deliver," Rotty answered.

"Aren't they still alive?" The ant questioned.

"I was going to take care of that once I got inside. It's more fun to see them burn alive on the grill, you know?" Rotty explained.

"That is true," The ant agreed, licking his lips. "Let me know when they're ready to eat."

Rotty nodded, walking inside with Shantae and Vera as the door

opened for them. When the door shut, Rotty let out a shudder before she noticed Shantae and Vera's terrified expressions. "Sorry about that. I don't feel good about it either."

"He wants to eat us?!" Vera asked worriedly.

"A lot of people here do," Rotty explained. "That's why you guys need to hurry and do what you need to do."

Vera's body was shaking. "I think I'd rather stick close to you guys."

"Hey Rotty. Where is the stone again?" Shantae asked.

"Good question," Rotty replied.

"D-did… did you forget?!" Shantae fumed.

"Maybe?" Rotty squirmed. "I mean, it's been a while."

Shantae sighed. "Whatever. Let's just go." She looked around, finding that the place resembled the underworld she read in her comics. Everything seemed to be on fire, although nobody had a problem breathing, not even herself. People were… playing shuffleboard? She wasn't sure what was more odd. The fact people were playing shuffleboard with tables that were on fire, or that it was actually accurate to her comics.

"Are they playing… shuffleboard?" Vera questioned.

"Yeah. It is Tuesday," Rotty replied.

From there, she saw a middle aged man with a mustache letting out a jolly laugh. "I win again!" he exclaimed.

"Hey!" Shantae shouted. "Do you think you could help us find something?"

The man turned his neck a full 180 degrees, startling Shantae and Vera. Rotty, on the other hand, found this amusing. "Of course!" he exclaimed. "Come over here!" He waved to them, gesturing for them to come forward. The trio approached the man.

“What are you looking for, girls?” the man asked.

“We’re looking for this thing called an Elemental Stone,” Shantae explained. “My mother made them as a seal against a demon. And now that demon is trying to steal them and ruin the Earth.”

“Oh, you mean this?” the man asked, holding up a bright yellow stone.

Shantae’s jaw dropped in surprise. *Is it seriously that easy?* she wondered, somewhat terrified. *If Risky’s boss and his minions got here first, would it have been that easy for him too?*

“That was…” Shantae began.

“...easy?” Vera finished her sentence.

“I remember a woman gave it to me once,” the man reminisced. “A beautiful woman. Although I can’t remember her name. Or really, mine either. It’s been so long. I think she wanted me to hold onto it for her. But I don’t know why.”

“Was her name Ana?” Shantae asked.

The man slowly nodded. “I think… I think it was. Yes. She was… my wife? Ah yes. It’s starting to come back to me. Now, who was I again?”

Shantae’s lip twitched excitedly. “Dad!” she exclaimed, wrapping her arms around the man.

“Dad? Am I? I guess… I guess I am. But… what’s your name?”

“Shantae.”

“Right. I think it was your mother who named you. And I… I am… Karnov?” he guessed.

Shantae’s eyes were flooding with tears. “Oh, dad! I missed you so much!”

Karnov slowly placed his arms around his daughter. “I-I missed you

too, Shantae. Or I guess I didn't, since I didn't remember. Weren't you just a baby when I last saw you? I remember first holding you the day you were born. Ah, good times. How long has it been?"

"Dad, I'm eighteen."

"What?! It's been that long? I'm sorry. I missed out on you growing up. All those years… gone. Who's been taking care of you?"

"Uncle Mimic."

"Right. My old friend. He had some odd friends himself."

"What do you mean, Dad?" Shantae asked.

"He... knew the man who killed your mother," Karnov stated, his memory almost fully having returned.

"What?!" the trio said simultaneously.

"Granted, he wasn't friends with him anymore. Your mother, the last time I saw her, was going off to fight this man. He called himself Jack."

"He killed Mom?!" Shantae asked angrily.

"Yes," Karnov replied. "I'm sorry you had to be roped into this, Shantae. Your mother and I, we just wanted a normal life for you."

"A bit late for that," Rotty observed.

Karnov's body began to flicker and fade. "Dad?" Shantae asked, her anger turning to worry.

"Seems it's time I said goodbye," Karnov said somberly.

"Wait, I have so many questions to ask you," Shantae stated quickly.

"I think there's time for one or two," Karnov assumed.

"How did you die? And what's the connection with my mom and Vera's? Our magic made us link up and chat."

“I think the first answer is cancer,” Karnov said nonchalantly, making Shantae shudder.

“Wait, why didn't Mimic tell me that? Do you know where you're buried?”

“I figure to keep you from being scarred. You were just a kid, Shantae. And you'll probably have to ask Mimic that. As for your second question, I think Ana was close friends with a woman named Aja. They might have shared some of their magic with each other. So it’s possible when you first met Vera, it reacted to your shared magic. Besides transformation, your mom had the power to grant the wish of somebody’s deepest desire in the darkest of times. Genies can only share their magic with half-Genies from what Ana told me.”

“That explains some things,” Vera commented. *Aja and Ana’s magic fused to help me save Rosa. Wait, does that mean I can transform too? Or is that a dormant ability I can’t really do?*

“Dad, will I ever see you again?” Shantae asked, her tears continuing to stream down her face.

“To be honest, I don’t know,” Karnov said before he tossed the stone to her. “Maybe when we’re both dead, I guess. Take that stone. You’ll need it more than I do.”

Shantae caught the stone and held it close to her chest. “I love you, Dad.”

“I love you too, Shantae.” Karnov was no longer there.

“Y-you gonna be ok?” Rotty asked, putting a comforting hand on Shantae’s back.

“I think I will be,” Shantae stated, wiping her tears away. “I could use a hug though.” Rotty nodded, wrapping her arms warmly around Shantae. “Thanks.”

“You should probably leave before you start to forget some stuff,” Rotty suggested, breaking away from Shantae. “I’ll look after Vera.”

Shantae nodded. “I’ll wait for you guys outside.” She ran out, leaving Rotty and Vera alone.

“Let’s go find your mom,” Rotty suggested to the young half-Genie.

Vera slowly nodded.

“You ok?” Rotty asked.

Vera shook her head. “Shantae got her happy ending with her dad. I don’t think I’m going to get the same.”

“Hey, don’t be like that,” Rotty suggested. “It’ll be fine.”

“That’s the thing. I don’t want to be so pessimistic. It’s just… this is what I feel is going to happen. And I don’t want it to be that way.”

Rotty placed a hand on Vera’s shoulder. “Let’s go find out. After this, what do you plan to do?”

“Help Harmony,” Vera answered. “If somebody’s in trouble and I have the power to help them, I help them. No matter what. It’s what I told you when I first met you. It’s what my mom has always done for me, and it’s what I’m going to do for the people who need help.”

“I wish I could remember our first meeting,” Rotty murmured. “I’m still not used to hearing my old name. I’m not even sure it even fits me anymore.”

“I can call you Rotty if you want,” Vera suggested.

Rotty smiled. “Thanks, Vera.”

“So how did you and Shantae meet?”

“Oh, that? Her uncle asked me to look after two of the stones. Shantae met me to find them and here we are. Speaking of that, I’ve been wondering. Do you… still hate her?”

“No,” Vera sighed. “I just felt angry for having all this information forced onto me, especially when she brought up Aja. I just wanted a normal life.”

“I’m sorry,” Rotty apologized, wrapping her arms around Vera to comfort her.

“Thank you, Rotty.”

As they walked throughout the underworld, they passed by various games the ghouls were playing. “They don’t get bored here, do they?”

“You’d be surprised what they can do to kill boredom,” Rotty agreed. They noticed a woman relaxing on a lawn chair while reading a magazine. This woman had dark skin like Vera and wore a teal dress with matching bracelets. She had her legs crossed as she let out a yawn, turning to the next page.

“Mom!” Vera shouted, surprising herself that she could ever call this woman a mother. The woman, startled, fell out of her chair. Vera dashed over and helped the woman up. “Are you ok?”

The woman groaned. “I was…”

“Mom, it’s me,” Vera stated, hoping for some recognition.

“Mom?” the woman questioned. “Do I know you?”

“You’re Aja. And I’m Vera. Do either of those names sound familiar?”

“Vaguely,” Aja said, rubbing her head. “Aja. That’s… me? Right?”

“And I’m your daughter. Vera!” the young girl exclaimed.

“I remember a daughter, but I don’t remember the name Vera.”

“Are you saying my dad named me?” Vera asked quietly, her eyes becoming moist.

“I guess so. I think I dropped you off at his house the day you were born, so I didn’t really get to know you.”

“Then why did you even bother having me?” Vera choked up, tears now streaming down her face. “If you were just going to throw me

away?”

Aja sighed. “Vera. I wish I could tell you I had a big important reason I left you with your dad. I don’t. When I was pregnant with you, I didn’t understand it. Genies aren’t typically mothers. We met a few times and one thing led to another. I didn’t think I was ready to be a parent. Your dad seemed to be the best option to take care of you. He really cared about me and I don’t know why. I figured he’d care for you a lot more. There’s not much I can say other than I’m sorry. I should’ve done more, but I didn’t. I’m just lucky you turned out to be a decent person.”

Vera’s knuckles slammed into Aja’s stomach, knocking the wind out of the Genie. “Sorry,” Vera apologized, wiping the tears from her face. “But I had to do that.”

Once Aja caught her breath, she said, “I deserve that.” Her body began to flicker out of existence. “I guess it’s time for me to go.” Her body was fading even faster than Karnov’s, making Vera question whether or not this was intentional. “Vera. You’re a lot better than I am,” Aja sighed. “Keep being that way.”

Vera nodded, now no longer crying. By the time Aja disappeared, Vera remembered something important. “Ah!” she shrieked. “I forgot to ask how she died!”

“You gonna be ok?” Rotty asked.

Vera groaned. “Maybe. I have closure, but I don’t feel good about it.”

Chapter 15

Chapter 15

Holly waltzed into the mayor's office, finding him sleeping at his desk with no guards or even employees around. *No security?* she thought. *What an idiot.* She stopped inches away from his head, which pre-occupied the top of his desk. She snapped her fingers, making him jump out of his chair.

"Who are you?!"

"Holly Lingerbean at your service," Holly said proudly, bowing her head. "I'm here to apply for the job."

"Uh, which job?' the mayor asked.

"For Town Guardian," Holly answered.

"That role's taken."

"What?"

"Yep. You just missed out. A few days ago, our resident half-Genie took the job."

"Half-*Genie* ?" Holly asked, her left eye twitching slightly.

"Yep. Gave her the job on the spot. I figured a half-Genie would be the best pick."

"And tell me, what can she do? Magic wise, I mean," Holly stated.

"I don't know," the mayor admitted. "She hasn't really shown any magic over the years."

"Then why hire her?" Holly questioned.

"I figured she'd do something nifty in the future."

“So, you hired a girl with no qualifications because of *what* she is rather than *who* she is?”

“Never thought of it like that,” the mayor replied. “So, what can you do?”

“I’m highly skilled in hand-to-hand combat,” Holly boasted. “I’ve studied across the world for my skills. I know five different languages. I’m great with kids. And if anybody needs a decent meal, give me the ingredients and I’ll make a meal that’ll feed the entire town!”

“Can you provide any proof to those claims?” the mayor asked.

Holly assumed a fighting stance, carefully keeping her guard up while eyeing any potential openings on the mayor. “Gladly.”

“Uh, that won’t be necessary,” the mayor said, sweating profusely. “You’re hired.”

Holly smirked. *He is* such *an idiot. How did he even get elected?* she wondered. “You won’t regret this, Mayor,” she assured him. “And a little bit of advice. Don’t assume what a person is capable of because of their background. I grew up poor with my dad and look at me now! That half-Genie probably grew up pampered and look what she can do: nothing.”

“You do have a point,” the mayor conceded.

“So, what’s it pay?”

“Still figuring that out,” the mayor admitted, leaving Holly flabbergasted. “But you get free rent. Unfortunately, we’re a little short on houses, so you’ll have to share with Shantae.”

“Who?”

“The half-Genie. I’m sure she won’t mind.”

Holly groaned. “Fine,” she spoke. “Where does she live?”

“At the lighthouse. Can’t miss it.”

“What about a key?” Holly asked.

“Just knock. Somebody’ll open it for you.”

Holly facepalmed herself. “Ok then,” she grumbled, walking out of the office. As she did so, she heard the mayor mumbling.

“Who left that door open?”

Holly winced, realizing her power had subconsciously activated. She had thought she had been quick enough to avoid exposing the mayor to her curse. For decades now, she had roamed the Earth with a nightmarish ability: the power to make a person forget certain memories. However, she had no control over when it activated or which memories it erased. Anyone who had spent more than a few minutes in her presence had the possibility of losing at least one memory.

She walked over to the town’s dock, only to bump into someone. She looked around, unable to locate who she bumped into. “Hello?” Holly asked.

“Down here!” a high-pitched voice exclaimed, prompting Holly to look down. Holly saw a small child in front of her.

Aw, Holly thought, bending down to talk to the kid. *She’s so cute.* “What’s your name, kid?”

“Mia!” the child exclaimed. “Who are you?”

“Holly Lingerbean. The town’s new guardian!” the woman answered proudly. “And a friend to everyone who needs a hand!”

“Oh, wow!” Mia exclaimed. “Can you help me with math homework?”

Holly winced once more, realizing the ramifications of providing such assisstance. While she wanted to say no, Mia’s innocent eyes were too adorable to say no to. *She’s a kid. Most kids don’t remember their childhoods anyway,* Holly convinced herself. “I can see what I can do. What are you struggling with?”

“Uh… division. I think,” Mia stated. “I know it’s got to do with

multiplication."

"That's easy," Holly assured her. "Think of it as the reverse of multiplication. Do you know how to multiply?"

"Yep!"

"Do you know your times tables?"

"Yep!"

"That's good, Mia. Now, work backwards. Remember the results of the times tables?"

"Somewhat."

"Good. Now, try this. What is 10 divided by 5?"

"Oh, uh, let me think," Mia pleaded. "I can do this."

"Take your time," Holly said, but quickly bit her tongue upon realization of what she had said. "Take 5. Find what you can multiply to get 10."

"2?" Mia guessed.

"That's good, Mia!" Holly nodded excitedly. "Now, what's 24 divided by 4?"

Mia began counting on her hands, counting multiples of 4 before she got her answer. "6! 6 groups of 4! That's 24!"

"Wow, you're really good at this!" Holly said, clasping her hands together proudly.

"I just got one question," Mia said.

"Ask away."

"Are you a half-Genie?"

Holly's eye twitched yet again as she bit her tongue. "No. No, I am not," she spoke as calmly as her voice could allow.

“But you got pointy ears like Shantae does,” Mia pointed out. “And you’re so smart! You’re almost magical like that!”

“You know Shantae?” Holly asked.

“Yeah!” Mia exclaimed. “She’s super cool and nice! She’s a half-Genie! She taught me multiplication! And she wasn’t even the town guardian!”

Seems Shantae may not be so bad , Holly noticed. *But I’m not going to let her get away with any special treatment.* “What’s so special about being a Genie?” she asked the child.

“Oh, they’re super cool and strong! They’re our protectors from space, I think!” Mia explained. “And they can use magic! Nothing’s cooler than magic!”

“Can Shantae use magic?”

“No, why?” Mia asked.

“Then what’s the difference between me and her? I can’t use magic either,” Holly stated.

“Uh… I don’t know,” Mia admitted. “I guess no difference.”

“Shantae seems like a good person,” Holly conceded. “But you shouldn’t value people for where they came from. What they can do, that’s what you should value.”

Mia nodded. “You got it, Ms. Holly! Um, Ms. Holly?”

“Yes?”

“Oh, um, can you explain division again? I think I forgot.”

Holly sighed. *I really shouldn’t have dragged the conversation out. At least it wasn’t too important of a memory,* she told herself. “Sure.”

“Did you figure stuff out with your mom?” Shantae asked.

Vera sighed, taking the metal helmet off. “Yes and no. I still hate her, but I know why she left.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” Shantae asked.

“Maybe later,” Vera replied. “I need to make sure my family’s ok. They were waiting for me outside.” She turned to Rotty. “Please don’t mention that I saved you. I don’t know how to do that resurrection trick again, even if I tried. I don’t want people thinking I can just do that whenever.”

Rotty nodded. “You got it.”

“Hey, what happened to the guard?” Vera asked.

“I may have hair-whipped him,” Shantae stated sheepishly. “He was trying to take a bite out of my hair, so I managed to make him leave.”

“So much for security,” Rotty murmured. “Well, just one stone to go.”

“Wait, you can use your hair as a whip?” Vera questioned.

“Vera!” an elderly voice shouted, startling the trio.

“Aunt Agnes!” Vera shouted excitedly, running over to hug the elderly woman. Two young girls joined them in their embrace.

“Is that her family?” Shantae asked, surprised by their sudden appearance.

“Guess so,” Rotty assumed. *Not much of a resemblance,* she thought to herself.

“Who are these two?” Agnes asked, breaking from the embrace.

“These your friends, Vera?” Nora asked.

“It’s a bit complicated. This is Shantae,” Vera said, gesturing towards the purple-haired half-Genie.

“You’re the one who hurt Vera?” Agnes questioned, recognizing the

name. “And why are you here?”

Shantae winced. “I didn’t mean to. I’m not used to those magic phone calls. I’m really sorry that happened. As for why I’m here, that’s a bit complicated.”

“The past is the past,” Vera stated. “Let’s not dwell on it. We sorted things out.”

“If you say so,” Agnes said with a shrug.

“And this is Rottytops,” Vera explained.

“Hey, why are you green?” Nora asked.

“Nora!” Molly shouted.

“What?” Nora asked, covering her ears.

“You can’t just ask people why they’re green!”

“It’s fine,” Rotty stated. “I mean, there is a reason I’m green. I’m a zombie.”

“EEEEEK!” Nora shrieked, hiding behind Molly. “She’s gonna eat us!”

“No, I’m not,” Rotty stated, wincing from the young girl’s screams. “I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“She’s ok,” Vera insisted. “She’s a good friend to Shantae. And I trust Shantae,” she claimed.

“I was about to say, Rotty seems trustworthy,” Molly observed.

Rotty smiled. “Thanks.”

“Sorry,” Nora whimpered. “I’ve read stories of zombies eating people and not leaving even a single bone behind.”

“I think the fact I haven’t even tried anything like that should be a clue,” Rotty pointed out.

“Vera. Did you get to see Aja?” Agnes asked, ignoring the headache the previous conversation was causing her.

Vera sighed. “Yes. She wasn’t ready to be a mother. That’s why she left.”

Agnes groaned. “I’m sorry, Vera.”

“No, it’s fine,” Vera insisted. “I got what I wanted. Now I don’t have to deal with her ever again.”

“Are you sure?” Agnes asked.

Vera shrugged. “I’ll get over it. I just don’t want to think about it right now.”

“Hey, we’re for you,” Nora pointed out. “I’m a great listener if you ever need it.”

“Same goes for me,” Molly added.

Vera beamed. “Thanks, guys.”

“Anytime, sis!” Nora exclaimed.

“So, this is your family?” Shantae asked, startling the quartet.

“Yes,” Vera said after regaining her senses. “You’ve met my aunt. And these two are my sisters.”

“Molly. Nice to meet ya.”

“I’m Nora! And together, we are the Sirens!” Nora exclaimed. Everyone looked at her, even her own family, in bafflement. “What?”

“The what?” Molly asked.

“Do you even know what siren means?” Agnes sighed.

“I just thought it sounded cool,” Nora said with a weak shrug. “Why? What is a siren?”

“Women who sing a song that lure men to their death,” Molly

answered, making Nora gulp. “And there’s a lot more to it than that.”

“Hmm… maybe we can change the meaning of the word?” Nora suggested. “To mean ‘Awesome Woman!’”

“What if a guy wants to join?” Vera pointed out.

“Then it’ll be ‘Awesome Person,’” Nora stated quickly.

“Won’t people be confused since they won’t know you’re using a different meaning?” Agnes pointed out. “Most people don’t think of teenagers when they hear the word siren.”

Nora groaned. “Why do you guys have to think of stuff like this?”

“I think it sounds pretty cool,” Shantae interjected. “The name, I mean.”

“Thanks!” Nora exclaimed. “I thought of some nicknames for our Siren group. I’d be Lobster Siren.”

Vera giggled. “ *Lobster?* ”

“Well, I can grow a big lobster tail out my back,” Nora reminded her. “What else would I be called?”

“What names did you come up for us?” Molly asked, slightly curious.

“Oh, um. You’d be Coral Siren,” Nora said to Molly.

“ *Coral?* ” Molly questioned. “Nothing about me has to do with coral.”

“I mean you found your hat near some coral, right?” Nora pointed out.

“I mean I guess,” Molly murmured.

“What about me?” Agnes asked.

“Um… how about… Angler Fish Siren?” Nora guessed.

“Is it I because I look like that kind of fish?” Agnes said, slightly angered.

“Uh… depends. Which answer would make you less angry?”

“Nora…” Agnes growled.

“Yes…” Nora whimpered, backing away slowly.

“Wait, what about me?” Vera interjected.

“Water Lily Siren?”

“Eh, keep working on it,” Vera suggested. “What would Mom be?”

“Empress Siren!” Nora exclaimed.

“Not bad,” Vera replied.

Shantae let out a yawn, barely able to keep her eyes open. “Wish I could get some sleep.”

“You can stay at our place if you want,” Nora offered.

“Thanks,” Rotty spoke up. “That’s pretty nice of you.”

“Think of it as an apology for earlier,” Nora stated.

“We should probably call Bolo and Sky,” Rotty said to Shantae. “Make sure they’re ok.” She passed her phone to Shantae. “Here.” Rotty heard snoozing, making her do a double take.

“Is she sleeping…” Vera began.

“...standing up?” Agnes finished.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16

“So, you two have any plans after this?” Bolo asked as the group stood inside the forest still, bewildering Sky and Risky.

“That’s assuming we live through this,” Risky pointed out.

“Just being optimistic,” Bolo replied sheepishly.

Sky smiled. “I appreciate the sentiment, Bolo. What do you’ve got planned after this?”

“Ask a girl out, see how that goes,” Bolo said confidently.

“And who would that be?” Risky asked, somewhat curious.

“Emma.”

Sky’s eyes widened in surprise. “Bolo, you just met her,” she said, flabbergasted.

“Oh, right,” Bolo realized. “Then I’ll take it slow.”

“That’s better,” Risky said with a chuckle. “People don’t like to rush things.”

“Why her?” Sky asked.

“Well, I guess she has this different feeling about her,” Bolo said. “Like, her and I are on the same level.”

“You’re both idiots,” Risky said bluntly.

Bolo winced. “You don’t have to put it like that.”

Risky shrugged. “It’s the truth.”

Sky groaned. “Even if it’s the truth, don’t just say it like that.”

Risky sighed, rolling her eyes. “Fine.”

“What about you, Sky?” Bolo asked.

“I don’t know,” Sky admitted. “Maybe go on a diet?” While she did not care to admit it, she disliked how much she weighed. She couldn’t help but wonder if it contributed to why she couldn’t keep a boyfriend.

“Maybe I can help with that,” Bolo offered. “I got a good exercise and diet regimen I use. It should help you out in no time.”

“Sure,” Sky agreed. She turned to Risky. “What about you?”

Risky chuckled. “I didn’t think that far ahead,” she admitted. “I’d have to give it some thought.”

“You could live with me if you want,” Bolo offered. “Since you don’t have a ship anymore. I’m my town’s guardian, so I get free rent.”

“I’m not sure I’m cut out to have a roommate,” Risky pointed out.

“They gave me a spare bedroom,” Bolo replied.

“I’ll think it over,” Risky answered, making Bolo grin.

“If I don’t have a sister, then who’s Plink?” Harmony asked her grandmother.

The woman sighed. “I have no idea. But I’m glad you’re ok, at least. You can call me Cherami, if Grandma doesn’t fit.”

“It’s been a crazy few days lately,” Harmony stated. “I was celebrating Mom and Dad’s anniversary and then I woke up in a dungeon. I couldn’t remember anything until it started coming back to me.”

Cherami sighed. “I wish I could even begin to understand what happened to you, but I don’t.”

Jack sighed, making Harmony question what was going on even more. *I know the answer. But… you're not going to like it. For simplicity's sake, I would like permission to enter your grandmother's head, so this story doesn't have to be told twice.*

These words caused a shiver down Harmony's spine. *Is this going to break our trust?*

A moment of silence went by before Jack finally answered. *Most likely.*

Harmony sighed. *I don't know why I keep trusting you. Something always feels off about you, but I keep wanting to believe you're a good person.*

Jack remained silent.

Harmony turned to her grandmother. "Grandma, this is gonna sound odd, but I have a voice in my head."

Cherami raised an eyebrow. "Like a coocoo voice or a magic voice?"

"Um… magic?"

Cherami sighed a breath of relief. "Ok, good."

"Not the reaction I was expecting," Harmony admitted.

"Harmony, I was friends with your mother. You think I don't know about this kind of stuff?" Cherami laughed.

"Well… the voice wants to speak with you."

"That's fine. Let him in."

Salutations, Jack spoke inside the elderly woman's head.

Cherami shuddered. "What's wrong with your voice?" she asked, wondering what kind of person was inside her head.

That's a long story. But not the story I wish to tell right now. Harmony wishes to know what is going on with her 'sister.' And I

believe I have an answer.

“How did you meet Harmony?” Cherami asked.

I am her caretaker. I was friends with Serena and Aaron. My name is Jack.

“Jack? You’ve seen better days,” Cherami said with a laugh.

“You know him?” Harmony asked, puzzled by Cherami’s level of knowledge.

“Yeah, your parents introduced me to him,” Cherami replied. “Where are you, Jack?”

Trapped in a new prison, Jack explained. *But that is a story for another time. Right now, I am going to explain what happened when Harmony woke up recently. Harmony, tell me. Are you familiar with any magic besides what I’ve taught you? Something perhaps your mother mentioned once?*

Harmony shook her head.

I was hoping she had. Cherami, I feel you should know this. Serena and Aaron are no longer with us.

Tears filled Cherami’s eyes instantly. “My Aaron… is… actually dead?” she said, her voice trembling. She had a feeling her son had died a long time ago, but she truly did not want to believe it was in fact true.

I’m sorry to say it, but yes, Jack replied.

Harmony walked over to her grandmother, this time being the one to give somebody a hug. Cherami sobbed loudly, wrapping her arms tightly around Harmony. “How long?” Cherami asked. “How long has he been dead?”

Over a decade, Jack answered.

Now, it was Harmony’s turn to cry. “What I lived through, it was all a dream, wasn’t it?” she finally asked, realizing the inconsistencies of

her memories.

Ever since you were young, yes, Jack said, remorse coating his voice. *I created a dream world for you to live in until you woke up. I did not want you to miss out on your childhood, Harmony. I created this world so that you could grow up to be a normal person. I never wished to tell you this, but you deserve to know the truth.*

“What is wrong with you?!” Cherami demanded. “Who traps a kid in a dream like that? Why didn’t you just find me to take care of her?”

Silence! Jack’s voice roared, startling everybody, even the Pirate Master himself. *I-I… I’m sorry.*

Harmony took a deep breath. *Jack. You said you’d never lie to me, right?*

Yes.

How did my parents die? Silence filled Harmony’s mind, making her more angry. *Answer me.*

It was me, Jack finally answered, his voice choking up. *I killed them.*

Chapter 17

Chapter 17

Shantae rose up, finding she was under the cover of somebody's bed. "Where am I?" she asked. She noticed Rotty standing against the side of a wall.

"Oh good, you're up," Rotty stated, taking notice of Shantae. "We're at Vera's place."

Shantae rubbed her eyes. "I fell asleep?" she yawned.

Rotty chuckled as she walked over to Shantae. "Standing up. It was a riot. You were asleep for a couple hours. I had to carry you back. You're heavier than you look."

Shantae looked away in embarrassment. "I guess I do need to eat healthier."

"So, how ya feeling?"

"Better. You?"

Rotty shrugged. "Could be worse. Just coming to terms with some things."

"What do you mean?"

"My old life, I guess." She sat down next to Shantae on the bed. "My old name was Rosa," she said, looking down. "It feels so weird hearing it. Vera told me I used to wear glasses and my hair was grey. I can't really imagine that. Ever since I became a zombie, I've never had vision problems."

Shantae raised an eyebrow. "Do you want to go back to being human?" she asked.

"I don't know. Maybe. Do you want me to go back?" she asked, locking eyes with Shantae.

“If that’s what makes you happy, then sure,” Shantae said with a shrug. “It’s your choice, Rotty.”

Rotty let out a sigh. “That’s assuming I can find somebody who can help me. You know, it’s funny. I’ve only known you a short while, but I feel like you’re my best friend. I bet that sounds weird, doesn’t it?” she said with a small chuckle.

Shantae giggled. “A little bit. But I get it.”

Rotty bit her lip, hesitant to ask her next question. “Do you ever feel… like people are meant to meet each other? Like how we met Vera or each other?”

Shantae giggled. “That would feel more convenient than saying everything so far has been a coincidence.”

Rotty nodded. “Yeah. I guess I’ve been thinking about what you said, when we first met. How being immortal sucks.” Rotty’s tone took a grim turn as she wrapped her arms around herself. “You and your friends, you’re all going to get old. While I’ll stay the same. If you have kids, I’m going to be there by the time they have kids and so on. But you’ll be gone. And I’ll still be there. And I don’t know when it’ll end. If it’ll end. And the same thing will happen with my brothers too. I don’t even know what they think about it.”

Shantae pulled the covers off herself and moved closer to Rotty, wrapping her arms around her green friend. “Hey, don’t think about that. Yeah, you have a point, but we’re going to fix that. We’ll make you human again, Rotty. So you don’t have to be scared anymore.”

Rotty blinked in disbelief. “Are you serious?”

Shantae nodded. “If part of me has Vera’s magic, then I should be able to heal the rest of you. And your brothers too. We just need to figure out how to control it.”

Rotty smiled as she stood up off the bed. “We should focus on getting that last stone first. You should train whatever animal forms you’ve got so we’re prepared. Do you have any more besides the monkey and the bird?”

“I guess I can find out,” Shantae replied. She began dancing, finding a groove different from the ones before. She could sense a hidden energy inside herself, three different kinds to be precise. One of them was Vera’s magic. The other two felt unique, something she could not recognize. She moved majestically from left to right, moving back and forth like a snake. She unleashed a final movement, beginning the transformation. Her body’s skin began fading, transforming into a purple hue. Her hair disappeared into her head as her eyes grew in size. Her arms and legs became rounder, her nose growing in length. A bright light consumed the room.

Rotty covered her eyes with her elbow, shielding herself from the light. When the light faded, she saw a purple elephant standing before her. “Wow,” she murmured. “I wasn’t expecting that. An elephant, huh?”

Shantae tried looking around, but had trouble due to her eyesight growing worse and her neck mobility becoming stagnant. She could barely see where anything was. The only thing that seemed to have improved was her hearing and sense of smell. Everything felt so clear with those two aspects. Rotty sounded louder than normal even though Shantae assumed her friend was speaking normally.

“You can turn back whenever, right?” the zombie asked.

The room became consumed by light once more, returning Shantae to her normal self. Rotty pulled her elbow from her eyes when the light finally cleared. “I just have to think it,” Shantae explained. “I think an elephant could be useful, but probably only when I need to ram something. I could barely see where I was.”

“Do you have any more forms?” Rotty asked.

“I think just one,” Shantae answered. “I don’t know why, but my body is telling me that I do.”

“Then let’s see it,” Rotty replied eagerly.

Shantae nodded, getting into a groove once more. Once she found the beat, she began dancing on her tiptoes, feeling that this motion was the correct path. She tried to perform a final movement, but lost

her balance in the process. Once again, a bright light filled the room. Shantae's hair turned black as a red ribbon appeared out of the back of her hair. Her fingers started merging together until she only had two claws on each hand. Her legs, however, were splitting apart to create a total of four. When the light cleared, Rotty's eyes glimmered with excitement.

"So you can turn into a spider!" Rotty exclaimed.

Shantae raised a confused eyebrow. She looked at her arms and legs, then shouted. "What's wrong with my legs?!" Her breathing quickened to a frightening pace.

"Shantae, calm down," Rotty said, but that had no effect on her friend. "It's ok! Wait, you can talk?"

Shantae paused, coming to her senses with equal amounts of confusion. "I can? Wow, I can talk. I can't do that with any of the other forms."

"Weird," Rotty commented. "Hey, quick question."

"Yeah?"

"Since when do spiders wear bras?"

Shantae looked down, seeing that she was wearing a bra made out of spider webbing, making her groan. "Not again."

Rotty took notice of this particular statement, making her chuckle. "What do you mean *again* ?"

Shantae let out one more groan. "It happened to me when I turned into the bird. I think I screwed up the dance and it messed up my body because of it. Being able to talk is probably some glitch or something."

"That feels more like an improvement than a glitch," Rotty pointed out.

Shantae nodded before looking down at her legs. "How am I supposed to walk?"

“Maybe think of your four legs as two legs.”

Shantae rubbed her chin, trying to imagine such a scenario in her head. She gestured towards her left, moving both left legs forward. “Hey, it worked. Now, let’s focus on what I can do. I don’t like spiders but they've got to have something I can use.”

“Try climbing a wall,” Rotty suggested.

Shantae looked over to the wall next to her, making sure to move two legs at once with every step. She raised her front legs and attached them to the wall, which miraculously stuck. She tried climbing up, connecting her back legs to the wall as well. She spun around, seeing the room at an entirely different angle now. *Kinda cool to see it like this,* Shantae thought with wonder.

“Can you shoot webs too?” Rotty asked, interrupting her thought process.

“Maybe?” She held out her hand, attempting various gestures, but no webs were produced

“I think it might come out of your butt.”

Shantae shuddered. “Seriously?’

Rotty gave a shrug. “That’s how spiders work. Although I heard it’s technically not your butt it comes out of.”

Shantae groaned, turning around. Her backside faced upward, shooting out a web line that connected with the ceiling. She swung back and forth on the web line before letting the line extend herself down to the ground. She returned back to normal and let out a breath of relief.

“You aren’t going to see if you have any other powers?” Rotty asked.

Shantae shook her head. “I couldn’t sense anything else in me when I used the form. Same for the other ones I’ve used.”

“You don’t have much to work with here,” Rotty observed.

“Maybe not, but having those powers is better than not having them,” Shantae replied.

“Which one do you like most? The forms, I mean.”

“I guess the bird. I felt kinda free in a sense when I turned into it. It helped me in a tense situation and it just feels the most useful,” Shantae explained. “I think I’m getting a better grasp of what I’m capable of, but these forms don’t have much to really practice with.” She let out a sigh. *Did you ever have to deal with this, Mom?*

“Well, your mood might change with some snacks. Agnes made some for us,” Rotty stated. “Oh, and Iris wanted to talk to you before we leave.”

“Iris?”

“That’s Vera’s mom. Well, adopted mom.”

“What did she want to talk about?” Shantae asked.

“Didn’t say. But it seemed important.”

Shantae headed towards the door as Rotty followed behind her. “What did they make?” Shantae asked.

Rotty scratched her chin, trying to remember. “I think… cinnamon rolls?” she guessed.

“Really?!” Shantae exclaimed, dashing towards the dinner table in the kitchen. She grabbed several rolls and put them on her plate. She devoured them all within less than a minute, surprising Agnes and the three kids sitting next to her.

“Well, I’m glad you like my cooking,” Agnes said with a laugh.

“Mind saving one or two for me?” Rotty asked.

Shantae chuckled nervously. “Right. Sorry.” She turned to Agnes. “Hey, where’s Iris? I heard she wanted to talk to me.”

“In her room down the hallway,” Agnes answered. “Last door. Can’t

miss it."

Shantae nodded and raced down the hallway. "She's got a lot of energy," Molly observed.

"Almost as much as Vera when she has something sugary to eat," Nora agreed.

"You don't have to bring that up," Vera said sheepishly.

Shantae knocked on the door, prompting a voice on the other side to speak. "Come in." Shantae opened the door, seeing Iris laying in bed with a wheelchair sitting beside the bed. "You're Shantae, right?"

"Yeah," Shantae said, walking over to the side of the bed. "You're Vera's mom, right?"

Iris smiled. "Adopted technically, but I raised her all the same."

"I think you did a good job," Shantae said, smiling back.

"Thank you, dear. Now then, let's talk. How much do you know about the Genies?" Iris asked.

Shantae shook her head. "Very little. Why?"

"Vera doesn't know too much about them. I was wondering if you had some insight on them," Iris explained. "For some reason, Nora got her hands on some Genie books. I thought you might like to take a look at them."

Shantae nodded: "I'd like that. But why are you letting me see them?"

"Over a decade ago, my husband interacted with some of the Genies that visited Earth," Iris began. "Serena and Ana, the latter being your mother. I want to know if there's any connection with them as to why he disappeared so long ago. I figured maybe those books might reveal some hidden information to a descendant of a Genie."

“I’m sorry about your husband,” Shantae murmured.

“Thank you,” Iris spoke, giving a weak smile. “I met your mom only briefly. My husband, Jack, knew her a bit better. She got on his nerves, I remember.”

Shantae sighed. “Yeah, I’m noticing a pattern with that.”

“Oh?”

“My mom was… not the smartest person around.”

“I see. You know, Vera told me about Harmony. About the stuff with the stones that Rotty told her. Which I assume Rotty got from you,” Iris guessed.

“Yes.”

“There is only one reason I’m allowing Vera to help,” Iris stated. “There is a chance we can stop this monster before he can get out, if I understand correctly. The more hands on deck the better. However, I want my kids keeping their distance from any enemies. I know Molly has some tech to fight them, but I still worry about them. Nora and Vera can’t fight at all. They’ll be lucky if they can properly use Molly’s tech.”

“If they’ve got to fight, they’ll probably win,” Shantae assured her, recalling that the Tinkerbats lacked a killer instinct, and so had Risky. “What is Molly’s tech, anyway?”

“Laser guns,” Iris answered. “Molly told me they’re painless, but can knock out something small like a dog with one blast. It takes a few blasts on a human. And here’s something that’s been confusing me. What’s your plan for the stones? Can they be even destroyed?”

Shantae shook her head once more. “No. I’m going to ask my uncle what we’re going to do with them once we have all of them. I’ll go give him a call. Thanks for reminding me, Iris,” she said, waving as she headed out.

Iris sighed. “That’s one way to end a conversation.”

“Hey, can I borrow your phone again?” Shantae asked Rotty, who had returned to the guest bedroom Shantae had slept in.

“Sure. Who you calling?” Rotty asked.

“Uncle Mimic. I need to know what he’s planning to do with the stones.” Shantae dialed her uncle’s phone number and was pleasantly surprised at the quick response.

“Shantae!” Mimic exclaimed. “I’ve been trying to call you for over a day now. What’s been happening?”

Shantae winced. “Sorry, my phone died. But, we got most of the stones now!”

“That’s great! And I’ve got a solution for what we can do with the stones. I’ve been doing some research on how to dispose of those stones for good,” Mimic explained.

“Really? What is it?”

“There is a strange magical phenomenon once every century, which is coming up tomorrow at five in the morning,” Mimic explained. “A portal will open up in the middle of Scuttle Town, opening a door to another dimension. One inaccessible otherwise. It will only be open for a few minutes. That will be our chance to get rid of the stones for good. You need to get that last stone. If that monster can even get three of the stones, we lose. I’m not willing to let that happen.”

Shantae nodded. “Got it. Hey, Uncle.”

“Yeah?”

“Risky once said something to me. Something that made me think,” Shantae stated. “She said you value the stones over me. Is that true?”

“No. Of course not,” Mimic answered without any hesitation.

Shantae beamed. “Thanks. I just needed to hear it from you.”

“Anytime. I love you, Shantae.”

“I love you too, Uncle. Bye.” She hung up the phone and handed it back to Rotty.

“You aren't going to ask him about your mom and dad?” Rotty asked.

“I'll do it once all of this is over,“ Shantae replied.

“You know, that chat gave me an idea,” Rotty stated.

“What’s that?”

“Don’t tell Hedgehog or the others about the plan,” Rotty answered. “They have two stones, we’re about to have two ourselves. If we just toss in that portal our stones, that monster can’t breach into our world any further. And we won’t have anything to worry about.”

“That’s a good plan, Rotty,” Shantae answered. “But what about Risky? She’ll be stuck with that thing in her head.”

Rotty let out a sigh. “I’m sorry, Shantae. I can’t think of any way to save her. And this monster can’t escape his prison. Your uncle is too worried about it.”

“I guess you’re right,” Shantae murmured. “I just hate going behind people’s backs.”

“I get it,” Rotty replied, placing a hand on Shantae’s shoulder. “It’s not an easy choice, but we have to make it.”

Shantae sighed. “I just wonder how I’m going to tell Risky about this.”

Chapter 18

Chapter 18

“You guys ready to go?” Nora asked.

“I guess we are,” Shantae replied, sitting on the couch in Vera’s living room. There sat Vera, Molly, Nora, Rotty, Agnes and Shantae herself.

“Just make sure we stick together,” Agnes spoke, standing up.

“We will, Aunt Agnes,” Molly assured her.

“Let’s go get that stone,” Vera stated. “Once that’s done, it’ll be easier to convince Harmony once the bargaining chip is gone.”

“Speaking of that, where’s the last stone?” Shantae asked Rotty.

“Oh, that’s gonna be a problem,” Rotty spoke nervously. “Twinkle Palace. It’s *extremely* cold there.”

Nora shivered. “That’s gonna be rough.”

“I can handle it,” Agnes stated. “I grew up around that palace.”

“I’ll be able to handle it too,” Rotty agreed. “I’m not bothered by the cold.”

“Guess we’ll need some winter clothing,” Molly observed.

“I’ve got coats for all of you,” Agnes stated. “Should keep you warm enough.”

“Thanks,” Molly said with a smile while Vera, Nora, and Shantae gave approving nods.

“How far is Twinkle Palace from here?” Shantae asked Rotty.

“Well, it’s back in the Land of Sequin. Near Scuttle Town,” Rotty

answered.

“How far is that?” Shantae asked.

“Not too far,” Rotty replied. “We should be there in no time if we use the bird form.”

“What about us?” Nora asked. “We can’t fly.”

“I guess you guys could get there by boat if you have one,” Rotty replied.

“Well, I have been wanting to use the one I made,” Molly admitted with a smile. “And fortunately, it fits exactly five people.”

“Is there a mini-fridge?” Nora interected.

“No. There is no mini-fridge,” Molly stated, slightly vexxed.

“But what about-”

“There is no *normal* fridge either.”

“Aw man,” Nora complained.

“Hey, Shantae,” Rotty spoke. “How is that winter coat going to work if you turn into a bird?”

“I… didn’t think about that,” Shantae admitted. “I hope it doesn’t fuse with my body.”

“I can hold onto it for you,” Rotty offered.

“Let’s get a move on,” Agnes stated. “That portal you told us about isn’t going to be here forever.”

“Right,” Shantae agreed.

“Ready to fly, Shantae?” Rotty asked.

Shantae nodded, getting her body into a groove. *Let’s see if I can remember that dance,* she thought. *I just gotta screw it up though. That should be fun…* She tried to remember what angle she had

slipped at when she first transformed into the bird. She danced on one foot, recalling she had lost her balance previously. She gave one final thrust, enveloping the room in a bright light.

Her body became blue and furry in appearance, covered in feathers. Her tiara was fused to her head, unable to be removed. Golden jewelry adorned her ankles. As the light faded, everyone's eyes were on Shantae.

"That's what the bird looks like?" Nora asked. "I thought it'd be smaller."

"I'd love to study it sometime," Molly commented. "Shantae, how much can you carry?"

"She can't speak in this form," Rotty answered, making Shantae silently giggle.

Thanks, Rotty.

"Does that take any energy out of you?" Vera asked. "My magic does whenever I heal somebody."

"I think it might a little," Rotty answered, before turning to Shantae who gave a small nod.

I think the elephant, bird, and spider take a small bit out of me, Shantae wanted to say. *At least, when I use it for too long. They just felt that way to me. I could sense it, I guess.* She lifted her wings up into the air, beginning to take flight. She gestured towards her legs while locking eyes with Rotty. *I don't like doing this, but we need to save time.*

Rotty grinned. "I always wanted to fly again," she said, wrapping her hands around Shantae's ankles. Shantae flapped her wings harder, lifting Rotty off the ground. "See you guys at the dungeon."

Harmony fought back the tears in her eyes, having just listened to Jack's confession. *I don't know what to believe anymore,* she said to Jack.

I know it is a lot to take in, Jack said sorrowfully. *But I need to tell you the rest of the story for it to all make sense.*

“What’s more to know?!” Cherami shouted. “You killed my son. Harmony’s father. And her mother. The Genies were messed up people, but they were right to keep you imprisoned.”

The room went silent. Harmony could hear a faint syllable come from Jack, only for him to stop. Finally, he spoke. *I know this will not bring back your family, but… I’m sorry. Please… let me tell my story so you can at least understand why it led to all this.*

“Tell it to us tomorrow,” Harmony said bitterly. “I don’t want to hear another word from you tonight, got it?” Her voice was filled with a venomous rage.

The room went silent once more, but Jack did not speak again.

“Harmony, I’m so sorry,” Cherami spoke, wrapping her arms around her granddaughter. “I had no idea he did this…”

Harmony hugged Cherami back, appreciating the warmth the hug brought her. “Tomorrow, he’s going to explain everything,” she said bitterly. “And once he does… I-I’m…” Harmony burst into tears, unable to finish her sentence. “I-I need to take my mind off this,” she finally spoke.

“What do you plan on doing?” Cherami asked.

“Visit an old friend. If she’s still up.”

Emma’s eyes opened upon hearing the sound of knocking on her front door. Wobble Bell was barking excitedly and wagging his tail, racing over toward the door. *Who could it be at this hour?* she thought with a yawn. She opened the front door and saw Harmony weakly standing before her. “Harmony?” Emma asked happily. “You’re back early.”

“Yeah. I just need somebody to talk to,” Harmony murmured. “You’re kind of my only friend.”

“I’m glad you think of me as such,” Emma said pleasantly. “I was actually waiting for you to come back. Some people are looking for you.”

“Who are they?” Harmony asked.

“A guy named Bolo and his two friends,” Emma explained. “They want to get you away from some evil voice or something.”

Harmony let out a sigh. “Good idea,” she agreed. “Before I say what’s going on, I could use some cheering up.”

“Want some food?” Emma asked, smirking.

“If it’s not too much trouble.”

“Sure. It’s on the house. Ever since you came here, people have been showing up left and right. I even got a lot of money today. You want some donuts? I got some already prepared,” Emma offered.

“Sure,” Harmony replied.

“Truth be told, I’ve got a little bit on my mind too,” Emma admitted.

“Go ahead,” Harmony stated. “It’s probably quicker than what I have to say.”

Emma rubbed her hands nervously. “I think I got a bit of a crush on somebody,” she said with a nervous laugh.

Harmony smiled as her ears perked up. “Oh?” she inquired. “Who is it?”

Emma’s smile grew even wider. “Bolo.”

Harmony did a double take, making sure what she heard was correct. “Bolo?” she asked, unable to grasp the idea of somebody finding him attractive. She had nothing against Bolo, but she had trouble believing he could find a girlfriend.

“Yeah, and I think the feeling is mutual,” Emma replied.

Oh no, Harmony thought worriedly. “Hey, I’ve met Bolo,” she pointed out. “And he’s not really the dating type.”

“What do you mean?” Emma asked.

“He freezes up every time he sees a girl he finds pretty,” Harmony explained. “Don’t you think that would get annoying after a while? Especially if you’re on a date?”

“I didn’t realize…” Emma murmured, her head drooping.

“I’m… sorry,” Harmony stuttered, walking over to her friend.

“Do you have any idea why he does that?” Emma asked.

Harmony shook her head. “No idea.”

“Maybe I can help him fix that,” Emma suggested.

Harmony groaned. “Please don’t go into this with that kind of mindset.”

“I’m not one of those “I can fix him” girls. I’m doing this for anybody who might want to date him. Not just me. If he can fix that issue, that'll benefit everyone, right?” Emma stated.

Harmony sighed. “I guess. Just don’t ask him out until that issue is fixed, ok?”

“I won’t,” Emma assured her. “I have to get to know the guy first anyway. No point in asking out a stranger, right?”

“Glad you understand that at least,” Harmony said with a laugh.

“So, what’s going on with you?” Emma asked as she went to retrieve the donuts from the pantry.

“Well, like you said, that evil voice,” Harmony stated, taking the donut that Emma handed her. Once she finished plowing through the food, she wiped her mouth and continued speaking. “That really hit the spot.”

“I had a feeling it would,” Emma giggled.

“As I was saying,” Harmony continued. “Has there ever been somebody you thought you could trust, but it turned out you couldn’t? But you still wanted to trust them again, even after all of that?”

“I guess my dad,” Emma stated. “I told him I wanted to be a chef, and he almost sent me off to military camp, thinking that was “what was best” for me,” she said, using air quotes. “I used the little money I had to buy this old place. It was surprisingly cheap.”

“You got pretty lucky,” Harmony replied. “Sorry about your dad.”

“Thanks,” Emma chuckled. “For a couple weeks now, I was worried I was going to have to move back in with him. Until you, I didn’t have a single customer. It meant a lot to me that you showed up to my door.”

Harmony smiled. “I’m glad I did.”

“Hey, how did you meet that evil voice?” Emma asked.

“I think I met him when I was a baby,” Harmony replied. “I don’t really remember much before he put me in this weird dream world. He said he did it to give me the life I otherwise could not have lived. Even if he’s telling the truth, h-he still… killed my parents…” Harmony whispered.

“I know,” Emma murmured, walking over to wrap her arms around her friend. “Bolo’s friend told me about it…”

“I just wish I could talk to them. My parents,” Harmony whimpered, her eyes beginning to water. “Everything I remember about them is literally just a dream. I have no idea if my dream parents even acted like my real ones did.”

“I wish there was something I could do about all this,” Emma murmured. “I just want to see you happy again, Harmony.”

Harmony briefly smiled, wrapping her arms around Emma. “I appreciate it.”

Chapter 19

Chapter 19

This is bad, Jack thought to himself, hiding within the recesses of Risky's mind. *I never should have told Harmony the truth about her parents. She deserved to know it, but not yet. I'm acting on my emotions too often. With that purple-haired runt, I almost killed her over a blood relation alone. She reminds me so much of her. Ana.*

By the looks of things, Harmony won't be assisting me in my freedom. That means only Risky can help me now. The lamp she stole… I've been too lax about letting them get ahead of me. Mimic, old friend, you're planning something and I know what it is. My Tinkerbats have been watching your little half-Genie wretch and her zombie friend. My men have encompassed several islands by now. Luckily, they found the one the runt and her friend teleported to. I never expected the zombie, Mimic. Quite clever. She's most likely immune to my powers, crossing the barrier between life and death. Very clever indeed.

And by sheer coincidence, they met my wife and daughter. My… family… they're still alive. Iris. I'm so sorry. Nora, you're still so adorable. And it seems you've found some new sisters as well. I always wanted you to have a big family. Jack let out a sigh. *Do they… hate me? I wouldn't blame them if they did. Should I really visit them again? They might be better off without me. Or perhaps they deserve to know the truth, as Harmony does. I feel more comfortable confiding in some kid than I do my own family. I'm not much better than those Genies, am I? They abandoned their families like I did. No. Those Genies took me away from them.*

I just want to be free. To see my family again. Even if they hate me, I want them to know I'm alive. They deserve that much. Or… do they? Nora and Iris seem happy without me. I could've searched for them anytime once Risky woke me up. But I didn't. I truly am a coward. But no more. If nothing else, I can remove that traitor Risky from the face of the planet. I'm doing it again. Getting angry. Why can't I

control that? I was rarely angry before touching that crystal.

Hmm… I do have one trick left I can try. Thank you, Risky. If not for absorbing the first stone, I wouldn't have been able to this. But I need an appropriate time and location to use it. Its uses are limited at best. My men have been following Risky as well. They were so close to Harmony and they didn't even realize it. Fortunately, I know when to do my little trick.

Ok, we're here, Shantae thought to herself. She let go of Rottytops, who gently touched the icy ground in front of the dungeon. Shantae flapped her wings, making contact with the ground. A bright light consumed Shantae's body, reverting herself back to human form.

"I guess we made it before the others did," Rotty noticed. "You ok?"

Shantae wrapped her arms around her body, completely shivering. "I-I'm freeeeezing…" the half-Genie murmured. "How are you not cold?"

"I don't know," Rotty admitted with a shrug. "It just feels nice to me. You want your jacket now?"

"Yes," Shantae said, nodding. Rotty tossed Shantae a purple jacket, who dressed herself in the warmer clothing and zipped herself up. "Much better," she said with a grin. She rubbed her hands together, beginning to feel warmth in them again. "You think we should wait for the others?"

"We've only got an hour before the portal opens," Rotty replied. "We should probably hurry up and get the stone."

"Have you ever been in this dungeon before?" Shantae asked.

Rotty nodded. "Yeah. It's like a one room dungeon, so it should be easy to get the stone. The key is just a password I have to type in." She walked over to the door made of ice and began typing in a 3 digit code on the door's lock system. The door did not open.

"Please tell me you didn't forget it," Shantae winced.

“I didn’t,” Rotty assured her. “I think somebody changed it.”

“How could that happen?” Shantae asked.

“It’s a three digit code,” Rotty pointed out. “At some point, somebody could figure it out.”

“So somebody’s already inside?” Shantae asked.

“Looks like it,” Rotty assumed. “Let’s just hope the stone is still there.” She began entering different codes, hoping one of them would open the door. After a while, Rotty asked a question. “Hey, you want to, I don’t know, hang out after all this is over?”

“Do you have anything in mind?” Shantae asked.

“I heard they were making a movie out of Desert Blaze,” Rotty answered. “We could see that when it comes out.”

Stars appeared in Shantae’s eyes. “Really?! But which part of the comic is it adapting?”

“I think they’re squeezing the entire comic into a two hour movie,” Rotty said with a shrug.

Shantae winced. “That sounds awful.”

Rotty chuckled. “Yeah. I figured we could make fun of it together.”

Shantae smiled. “I guess we could.”

“I think I got it,” Rotty stated, hearing the lock come undone. The door swung open, slamming into Rotty’s face, knocking her head off her body. Shantae’s eyes widened in terror, quickly catching the head before it hit the snow. “Thanks,” Rotty’s head murmured before she noticed the rest of her body had collapsed onto the snow.

As the door opened, a giant red squid popped out. He had a buck tooth and purple spots on his body, along with a purple scarf to keep him warm. “Who’s trying to break into my house?!” he yelled.

Shantae wanted to cover her ears, something she was already

doing for Rotty. He was that loud. “We’re not trying to-”

“Oh, sweet! A dead body!” the squid exclaimed, picking up Rotty’s body and dashing back into the dungeon. “I can sell this!”

“What?!” Shantae shouted, removing her hands from Rotty’s ears.

“Where’s he going with my body?” Rotty said angrily.

“He wants to sell it,” Shantae explained, infuriating the zombie even more.

“We need to get it back,” Rotty stated. “I can't move at all if my head’s not on my body.”

Shantae dashed into the icy dungeon, finding what appeared to be a living room made of ice. There was a couch made of ice as well as a TV made of the same substance. Shantae nearly fell over from the slippery surface, barely keeping her balance. She noticed the red squid laughing at the TV, despite nothing being projected. Rotty’s body lay crumpled next to the squid’s chair. The squid was resting comfortably in his icy recliner, laying back.

“Hey!” Rotty shouted, making the squid jump out of his chair.

“Who are you people?!” the squid shouted.

“You stole my body,” Rotty stated angrily. “And I want it back.”

“Oh, that?” the squid asked. “You really shouldn’t leave important stuff lying around like that. I was going to sell it.”

“So, we can have it back?” Shantae asked optimistically.

“Yes… on one condition,” the squid spoke ominously. “You beat me, the mighty Squid Baron, in hand-to-hand combat.”

“Throw in the Elemental Stone and we’ll do it,” Rotty demanded.

“Elemental Stone? What’s that?” Squid Baron asked.

“That thing on your couch,” Shantae stated, pointing to a blue stone.

“My TV remote?” the baron whined.

Shantae facepalmed herself. “It’s not a remote,” she grunted. “Are we doing this or not?”

“Gotta do something, I guess,” Squid Baron said with a shrug. Shantae put Rotty’s head down, pulled her own head back, and smacked the baron on the head with her ponytail. “OW!” the squid cried, holding onto his head. “What was that for?”

“But… you said-”

“I meant like arm wrestling, not literal fighting,” Squid Baron complained. “Just take the stupid remote and body. I can just get up and change the channel anyway…”

Shantae stood there for a moment, baffled and still taking everything in. When her mind cleared, she grabbed Rotty’s head and reattached it to the zombie’s body. “Much better,” Rotty stated before she walked over and picked up the stone, placing it in her back pocket.

“I hate this chapter,” the squid murmured.

“Huh?” Rotty and Shantae asked.

“You don’t know?” the squid asked. “Eh, you’ll figure it out.”

Rotty and Shantae looked at each other in confusion before exiting the dungeon. “That was surprisingly easy,” Rotty commented. “Your mom didn’t really do a good job at hiding these.”

“Tell me about it,” Shantae sighed. “How much time do we have left?”

“I think… less than half an hour?” Rotty assumed. “We should probably get to Scuttle Town now.”

“Good idea,” Shantae stated. “Too bad we have to leave Vera and the others behind.”

“They’ll forgive us,” Rotty replied. “Hm… probably. You ready for this

to be over?”

Shantae nodded. “Definitely.”

“Take us in the direction of Scuttle Town,” Risky spoke.

“Why?” Sky asked.

“Scuttle Town’s the closest place to the ocean,” Bolo stated, prompting a grin from Risky. “That’s where you said Harmony might be, right?”

“Correct. My Tinkerbat army controls the ship,” Risky explained. “Knowing them, even if they’re listening to my boss, they’re most likely close to Scuttle Town in case the ship goes down under. A backup plan, if you will. And it would give us a nice place to rest until the morning.”

“We can’t rest until we find Harmony,” Bolo stated, surprising Risky.

“A little shut eye couldn’t hurt,” Sky yawned. “Wrench can’t fly all night, you know.”

“Sky makes a good point,” Risky pointed out.

Bolo sighed. “When we land, give me the stones so I can keep a lookout while you two nap.”

“Fine,” Risky sighed. As Bolo looked away, Risky smirked. The only thing that remained in her pocket was the miniature lamp she had stolen from Mimic. The Dribble Stone and Golem Stone she previously held onto had been reduced to ash, scattering across the sky as they flew. *This should extend how long I can stay in her body. Two down. Two to go.*

Chapter 20

Chapter 20

Wrench landed at Scuttle Town's dock, allowing the trio to get off his back. Sky let out a yawn. "Some shut eye should do the trick," she murmured, watching Wrench shrink down to normal size. The bird flew up to Sky's shoulder, prompting the bird keeper to pet the bird under his beak. "Good boy."

"You didn't see Risky's ship, did you?" Bolo asked.

Sky shook her head.

"I guess we missed it," Risky observed, looking at the water.

"Yo!" a voice called out from above. The trio looked up, seeing Shantae's bird form and Rotty in the air. Shantae let Rotty down gently before transforming back to human form. "You must be Shantae's friends."

Friend is a strong *term* , Risky thought to herself. In the corner of her eye, she noticed Sky trembling completely. The young woman was sweating profusely, barely able to breathe.

"Z-zom…" Sky muttered before falling towards the ground. Bolo quickly caught her before she hit the concrete, but she had already fainted.

That makes things easier, Risky thought.

"What's her deal?" Rotty asked.

"I think she's afraid of zombies," Bolo said sheepishly.

Rotty let out a sigh. "Well, we can talk about that later. Right now, we need to get rid of those stones."

"So you guys have a plan?" Bolo asked excitedly.

Shantae nodded. “We need to act quickly, though. There’s a portal about to open up. One we can throw the stones into. Then it’ll be over.”

“I don’t think so,” Risky stated, lifting up her hand. From the nearby ocean, two tentacles made of water smashed into Bolo and Rotty, making them slam into a nearby wall. The two Elemental Stones dropped out of Rotty’s pocket, making Risky smile.

What is she doing?! Shantae wanted to scream, but realized there was no time for that. Before she could take a step, she noticed her feet had been encased in cinder blocks. *The Elemental Stones. She absorbed them.*

Risky dashed towards Rotty, creating gauntlets of water around her fists.

Shantae struggled to move, only to realize the cinder blocks had fallen apart. *Her powers. She can only use stone at a time,* Shantae realized, dashing after the pirate.

Behind Rotty and Bolo, who now stood up, opened a blue portal. The portal swirled in the air, small bursts of electricity crackling off the portal’s ring. The duo noticed the portal, and quickly picked up an Elemental Stone. Rotty tossed her first one in, but Risky caught her arm before she could throw her in. Rotty dropped the stone by accident as Bolo tried stepping in.

With a quick flick of the wrist, Risky grabbed and snapped Bolo's arm. Bolo yelped in pain, but found the strength to knee her in the stomach. Unfortunately, this did not phase her. With another snap, both of Bolo’s arms became useless, but he tried his best to keep fighting. He threw a kick at the pirate. Two rocks flew into Bolo’s knees, making him drop to the ground at last.

Rotty swung her leg at Risky’s head, only to be backhanded and have her head fly clean off. The rest of her body crumpled to the ground while her head rolled across the docks. Out of nowhere, Risky could feel someone wrapping their arms around hers, preventing her from creating gestures to activate her powers. She turned around and grinned. “Old friend,” she stated happily.

“I’m not letting you go, Jack,” Mimic stated, tightening his grip on the pirate.

“Doubt it,” Risky spoke before her sharp teeth bit down on Mimic’s hands. Despite the pain, Mimic refused to budge.

“Hold her still, Uncle!” Shantae shouted. “I’ll get the stone!”

“No!” Risky screamed, finding the strength to free up her hands. A massive rock smacked Mimic in the back of the head, sending him tumbling towards the stone. Mimic fell onto the stone, giving Risky an idea as Shantae stopped in her tracks. Risky dashed towards the half-Genie, wrapping her arm around Shantae’s neck. Pulling out her pistol, she jammed it against Shantae’s skull. “You’re not getting rid of that stone,” Risky growled, her voice filled with venom.

Shantae’s face began turning red, something Mimic noticed as he stood up and picked up the stone.

How is he doing that? Shantae questioned. *Did he recreate a magic source? Maybe he got it from Rotty.*

“Jack, don’t do this,” Mimic said worriedly, taking a step closer.

“You’re the one causing this,” Risky stated angrily. “It’s simple. The stone, or your niece. Decide.”

Mimic’s grip tightened on the stone as he looked at Shantae. The half-Genie was beginning to lose consciousness, making the old man sweat. Several thoughts swirled inside Mimic’s mind. He took a deep breath and gave his answer. “Alright. You win.” He immediately tossed the stone behind him, letting it enter the portal.

“Nooo!” Riskys screamed, pulling the trigger. As she did, Shantae had used what little strength she had left to do what she did next. Taking a page out of the pirate’s book, Shantae took a chomp out of Risky’s hand, making the bullet move just past her left ear. The thundering gunshot rattled Shantae’s head as the half-Genie collapsed to the ground.

Risky screeched, ripping out pieces of her hair, growling like a mad dog. She began coughing, her body trembling. When it finally

stopped, she was rubbing her throbbing head in confusion. “Where am I?” she murmured. She winced, seeing the damage she had done. She started putting the pieces together. “He made me do this, didn’t he?”

“Unfortunately,” Mimic said regretfully.

Risky noticed Rotty’s head on the dock, walking over to pick it up. “I’m sorry,” Risky whispered.

“Your boss took control of you, right?” Rotty asked, having overheard the conversation.

Risky nodded, placing the zombie’s head back on her body. The zombie dashed over to Shantae, quickly doing chest compressions. “Shantae, wake up,” Rotty demanded, beginning to freak out.

“She was right,” Bolo whimpered, catching the attention of Mimic. “You do care about those stones more than us. Than Shantae.”

“I-” Mimic began.

“Wish I could be happy about being right, but I can’t,” Risky stated, crossing her arms.

“I thought she would get herself out of the way,” Mimic defended himself.

Shantae’s eyes fluttered open, slowly picking her head up. “You’re awake!” Rotty exclaimed, wrapping her arms around the half-Genie. Tears dripped down the zombie’s cheeks as she sobbed. “I thought I was going to lose you.”

Shantae heard what Rotty had said, but it was quite faint. When she tilted her head left towards Rotty, the zombie’s sobbing became a bit easier to hear, but was still very faint. She gently placed her hand over her right ear, finding much to her horror that Rotty’s voice became completely silent. “Rotty…” Shantae stated anxiously, pulling the zombie out of her sobbing.

“Yes?” Rotty asked.

“My left ear… I can’t hear out of it.”

Chapter 21

Chapter 21

“What do you mean?” Rotty asked.

“I think the gunshot made me lose my hearing, at least in my left ear,” Shantae stated.

“Shantae, I’m sorry,” Mimic spoke, but his niece did not acknowledge him. He could not tell if it was because she did not hear him or because she was ignoring him.

“I guess this ruins our plans to go see that movie,” Rotty commented sorrowfully. “But maybe I can get the DVD and put on subtitles.”

Shantae chuckled. “That could work.”

“What’s going on, here?” a familiar voice called out. The group turned behind them to see a young woman in green pajamas standing before them.

“Who are you?” Shantae asked, putting a hand to her right ear to make sure she could hear the young woman. She even took a few steps closer to help herself hear.

“Holly Lingerbean,” the orange-haired woman explained. “The new town guardian.”

“Wait, that’s my job,” Shantae complained, her right eye twitching. *Did that fatso replace me already?*

“Well, he decided I was more fit for the role,” Holly said with a shrug, infuriating Shantae.

“That fat idiot!” Shantae shouted, balling her hands into fists. “He fired me just as soon as he hired me?!”

“And… we’ll be living together,” Holly added with a sigh.

“What?” Shantae asked.

Holly sighed yet again. “Did you not hear me?” she asked.

“What?” Shantae asked again.

“She’s half deaf,” Rotty stated.

“Oh, sorry,” Holly stated with genuine regret, walking closer. “Which side does she hear from?”

“Right side,” Rotty answered.

Holly walked over to Shantae’s right side. “I said we’ll be living together.”

“Why?” Shantae asked.

“Because that mayor’s an idiot,” Holly said with a snort.

“Well, you’re not wrong,” Shantae sighed. “But why is he making you stay with me?”

“He said we’re short on houses, but you and I will be getting free rent,” Holly explained. “I asked him for the free rent on your behalf.”

“That’s pretty sweet,” Rotty commented with a smile.

Free rent, Shantae thought. *Wasn’t expecting that. But it should free up the bills for me and… Uncle Mimic.* She had been trying not to think about what her uncle had done, but it was clogging up her mind now.

Rotty noticed the glum expression Shantae had on her face. “You ok, Shantae?”

“I will be,” Shantae assured her friend. She turned to Holly. “You know, I always wanted a roommate.”

“Well, I’ll try not to be a bother,” Holly replied. “I’ll see you all later.” She turned around and returned to the lighthouse.

“I can’t help but feel like I’m forgetting about something,” Shantae

murmured.

“Probably wasn’t that important,” Rotty said with a shrug. “Hey, that chick didn’t freak out when she saw me!”

“Maybe she’s seen stuff weirder than a zombie with a brain,” Shantae suggested.

“Maybe,” Rotty agreed.

“Can somebody help me?” Bolo whimpered.

“Oh right!” Rotty exclaimed, running over to the blue-haired warrior. “I guess we need a stretcher for you.”

“I have one back in my workshop,” Mimic stated.

“Were we forgetting anything else?” Rotty asked, prompting a shrug from Shantae.

“Ah!” Sky shrieked, now having awoken from her brief slumber. She had hopped to her feet and prepared a combat-based stance. “Please don’t eat me!”

Rotty winced. “I’m not going to-”

“Get away from me!” Sky screeched, backing away.

“Hey!” Rotty snapped. “I don’t know what kind of zombies you’ve met, but I’m not a bad person! I’ve been helping Shantae this whole time and Mimic trusted me with two of the stones. I know you probably won’t believe me, but I don’t want to hurt you. Or anyone. I’d rather be friends with you than eat you.”

Sky paused, unsure of how to react. “...Sorry,” she finally said. “I just… never mind. Zombies just freak me out. Ever since I was a kid I guess.”

“Well, I’m not your typical zombie,” Rotty explained.

“Sorry,” Sky apologized again, rubbing her shoulders nervously.

“Can we… start again?” Rotty asked.

“...Maybe,” Sky said hesitantly. She looked to Shantae. “Do you… trust her?”

“Could you speak up?” Shantae asked, putting a hand to her right ear. “I’m kinda… half deaf.”

“What?!” Sky shouted. “How did that happen?!”

That I can hear , Shantae thought. “Well… Risky’s boss took control of her and shot me near the ear.”

“He can do that? Can he do that to us too?” Sky asked worriedly.

“I doubt it,” Risky replied. “He seemed to have been pulling a last resort. He’s been pretty quiet lately.” *You lose, old man,* Risky thought smugly. She waited for him to curse her out, but all she could hear was sobbing. She wanted to laugh at him and his misery, but she couldn’t bring herself to do it. She had never seen this side of her boss before; it was unnerving. When the sobbing stopped, Jack let out his miserable words.

Come to Spider Forest. Find the cottage where Harmony resides. Our story shall conclude there. Bring Shantae.

And why should I listen to you? Risky asked, but received no response. She tapped her foot against the ground, impatiently waiting for the silence to break.

This isn’t a trap, Jack assured her. *I have nothing left to lose now.*

Risky let out a sigh. *You’d better be right* , she warned him before she walked over to Shantae’s right side. “It’s not over.”

“What do you mean?” Shantae asked.

“My boss wants to have a chat with you and Harmony.”

“He knows where Harmony is?” Shantae questioned.

“At a cottage back in Spider Forest,” Risky replied.

Shantae shivered. “I hate spiders,” she murmured.

“This could be a trap,” Rotty pointed out.

“It’s not,” Risky stated. “I know my boss and I know when he’s lying. He wasn’t this time.”

“I’m still coming along,” Rotty stated. “The more the merrier, right?” she joked.

“That’d be nice,” Shantae agreed.

“Then it’s settled,” Rotty said, putting an arm around her friend’s shoulder.

“I think I’ll stay and help Bolo,” Sky suggested, noticing her friend’s injuries.

“Thanks…” Bolo said weakly.

“Stay safe, okay?” Sky told Shantae, approaching the half-Genie.

Shantae nodded. “I will.”

“You can use Wrench to fly all three of you there,” Sky offered.

“Wrench?” Rotty questioned. “What’s that?” Sky gestured her head towards the bird on her shoulder. “That bird’s even smaller than Shantae when she’s a bird,” Rotty commented. “How is he supposed to carry three people?” Sky grinned, whistling with her fingers in her mouth. Wrench flew to the ground and began growing in size, completely towering over the zombie. “Oh.”

“You doing ok?” Rotty asked, noticing Shantae’s glum expression on the trip to the cottage. “You look pretty down.”

“I’m just… still figuring things out,” Shantae replied. “You didn’t see it, but Uncle Mimic… he chose to risk the stone over me. I’m guessing he knew I’d live, but that gunshot… I can still feel it ringing in my ears. My left ear’s hearing is probably gone for good.”

“This is why I said to be wary of him,” Risky spoke from the front of Wrench.

“How much do you know about my uncle?” Shantae asked.

“My boss can tell you the whole story,” Risky replied. “And I’ll be there to make sure he’s not lying.”

“You really that lazy?” Rotty asked.

“Moreso tired,” Risky said, letting out a yawn.

Rotty let out a groan before returning to her conversation with Shantae. “Maybe Vera can heal you up?”

“Who’s Vera?” Risky asked.

“Another half-Genie,” Shantae answered, making Risky raise an eyebrow.

“Just how many of you are there?” the pirate asked.

“I think three,” Shantae replied. “Vera has healing magic. Maybe she can help me.”

“My body was being corrupted by my boss’s influence. There’s a possibility that my weapons were influenced too,” Risky replied. “Your left ear could be clouded by my boss’s dark magic, meaning Vera’s magic wouldn’t be able to help. Just be happy the dark magic hasn't corrupted you at all. Must be your Genie half.”

“Oh,” Shantae murmured.

“It’ll be alright,” Rotty assured her friend. “At least you can still hear out of the other one, right?”

“Yeah, but it’s not what it used to be,” Shantae replied. “I try not to think about it too much. Makes things worse when I do.”

Rotty wrapped her arms around her friend. “Shantae, I’m so sorry this happened. I wish I could’ve done something. I charged in without a plan and look where it got us.”

“Rotty, it’s fine,” Shantae insisted.

“No, it’s not,” Rotty stated, her eyes becoming moist. “I got kicked to the curb while you nearly died. How is that ok?”

“We’re both still alive,” Shantae pointed out. “I know it’s not ok. I just don’t like thinking about it. Please stop bringing it up right now.”

“I-I’m sorry,” Rotty murmured.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” Risky interjected. “What’s the story with you… uh… Rotty, right? My boss had no idea about you.”

“Yeah, Mimic figured that’d be the case,” Rotty replied. “He found me and my brothers one day and thought I’d be good for keeping the stones away.”

“Smart,” Risky replied. “I’m guessing my boss had his Tinkerbats spy on all of us. He wouldn’t have figured out the plan otherwise.”

“Hey, Risky…” Shantae murmured. “I’m sorry about… you know…”

“It’s fine,” Risky grumbled. “Better he’s in here than out there.”

“You’re not mad?” Shantae asked.

“I’m in the middle of two states right now,” Risky replied. “Understanding and… rage. The former is in control right now. Let’s make sure it stays that way.”

“Right…” Shantae whimpered.

Harmony returned to her cottage, where she was greeted by her grandmother. “You had me worried,” Cherami murmured, wrapping her arms around Harmony. “How did your visit with your friend go?”

“Well,” Harmony answered with a small smile.

“Was this a friend from before or after you woke up?” Cherami asked.

“After,” Harmony replied. “I don’t think I can really remember any friends from before my dream.”

“Well, best to focus on the present,” Cherami said somberly. A knock could be heard from the front door. “Who could be knocking at this hour?”

“I’ll get it,” Harmony offered, opening the front door. “Shantae?”

“Hey, Harmony,” Shantae greeted shyly.

“Why are you here?” Harmony questioned.

“To chat,” Shantae answered, pushing her right ear a bit closer to Harmony. “Can I… come in?”

“Who’s your friend?” Harmony asked, noticing a green-skinned girl standing a few feet behind Shantae.

“I’m Rottytops,” the zombie answered with an awkward wave. “Rotty for short. I’m Shantae’s friend. Figured she could use one for this.”

“For what?” Harmony asked.

“A chat with somebody we all know,” Risky answered, walking into Harmony’s field of vision. A shiver went down the half-Genie’s spine, making her ball her fists.

“What are you doing here?” Harmony asked. “Shantae, you can’t trust this lady. She’s-”

“On the contrary, it’s my boss you can’t trust,” Risky interrupted, walking closer to Harmony.

“You mean Jack?” Harmony questioned.

“So that’s his name,” Risky observed.

“He never told you?” Shantae asked.

“Why do you think I kept calling him ‘my boss’?” Risky replied. “Not like he ever trusted me with anything.”

“I guess you caught me at a good time then,” Harmony murmured. “We aren’t really getting along at the moment.”

“Good to hear,” Rotty replied. “We’re not exactly getting along with him either.”

“What did he do?” Harmony winced.

“He made Shantae half deaf,” Rotty said bitterly.

Harmony’s eyes snapped wide open. “What?!” she shouted.

“Yeah…” Shantae murmured, pointing to her right ear. “I can only really hear out of this one, and not that well. If you could… get a bit closer, I’d appreciate that. You sound really quiet to me.”

Harmony took a few steps closer. “Is this better?” she asked worriedly.

Shantae nodded. “What happened with you?” she asked.

“He told me the truth,” Harmony replied. “Well, some of it… he trapped me in a dream world for most of my life. I still don’t know why.”

I will tell you soon, Jack interjected, surprising the redhead.

Harmony tried to ignore the comment and continue her conversation. “I’m sorry about what he did to you,” she said to Shantae.

“The feeling’s mutual,” Shantae replied. “Risky told me about the dream thing earlier. She was just as shocked as you were when she learned about it.”

Harmony let out a sigh. “Glad you’re on the right side,” she said to Risky, who gave a half-hearted shrug. “Come inside, all of you. I think Jack is going to chat with us soon.”

The trio followed the redhead inside while Shantae pondered a certain thought swirling inside her head. *I can’t help but wonder if I’m forgetting something.*

Back at Twinkle Palace, Vera and her family had arrived at the dungeon. But neither Shantae nor Rotty were present. “Where are they?” Vera wondered.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22

“You’re going to have to let him in your head willingly,” Risky warned Shantae, making the half-Genie shudder.

After what he did when he forced his way in… Shantae thought miserably.

“Harmony, who are these people?” Cherami asked, entering the living room.

“They got roped into Jack’s scheme,” Harmony explained. “They’re friends of mine. Although… I haven’t known them for long.”

“Is that so?” Cherami asked. “Well, nice to meet all of you. I'm Harmony's grandmother, on her dad's side.” Her eyes locked with Risky, making her stare at the pirate. “Who are you?”

“Used to work for Jack, but not anymore.”

“Probably for the best,” Cherami agreed.

“So, what are we waiting for?” Rotty interjected.

“For him to speak with us,” Cherami replied.

I’m here, Jack spoke throughout all their minds, except for Rotty’s. The zombie noticed the grimaces on her friends’ faces.

“What’s going on?” she questioned.

“He’s here,” Harmony answered.

“I can’t hear him,” Rotty replied.

“Maybe because you’re a zombie and he can only speak to the living,” Shantae suggested.

Good deduction, Jack replied, making Shantae shiver. *I suppose it's time I told my story. Just know I never wanted things to come to this.*

Yeah, I believe that… Risky thought sarcastically.

This all began over a decade ago… Jack said ominously. *I suppose I should begin with how I met Serena, Harmony's mother. Allow me to share with you my memories…*

"Hey, you've got the wrong idea here," a much younger Jack complained. Ana stood before him, trying to wrestle the crystal out of his hands.

"Human beings can't hold onto dark magic," Ana argued. "It corrupts them."

"Now you tell me," Jack complained, handing over the crystal. "We just sold over a dozen copies at an auction last week. So finding them all might be a problem."

"Copies?" Ana questioned.

"Yeah, my partner made a machine that copies stuff," Jack explained.

"Then I'm gonna have to bring him in for questioning too," Ana sighed. "Sorry about that."

"Hey, there's got to be laws against this," Jack argued. "Don't you need a permit or something?"

"I'll figure that out when I get back," Ana replied, grabbing Jack by the arm. She noticed how skinny his body was. "It seems to already be taking effect."

"What are you talking about?" Jack asked.

"The dark magic," Ana explained. "Maybe Aja can fix you up. I've never dealt with this kind of stuff before."

Jack tried wrestling his arm out of Ana's grip to no avail. "Let go of me!" he barked. "I've got a wife and kid to take care of. I can't be visiting some magic prison for a crime I didn't even know I committed."

Ana sighed, slamming her fist into Jack's face and knocking him out in a single hit. "Sorry," she murmured.

"Ana!" a voice shouted.

"Serena?" Ana asked worriedly, spinning around. "You were supposed to wait outside."

"I overheard your conversation and I had to step in."

"Not like I had much of a choice," Ana complained. "You're always going on about us needing to follow the rules."

Serena groaned. "I understand that. But knocking him out isn't going to help us. He's going to be even less likely to help us now when he wakes up. We're supposed to be guardians, not menaces."

Jack groaned, his eyes beginning to flutter open. "Guess I didn't knock him out," Ana said with an awkward smile.

"Let go of him," Serena demanded. Ana did so, letting Jack fall into the sand beneath them. "Ana!" the redhead snapped.

"Sorry," Ana apologized. "I thought he would stand up on his own."

Serena bent down, holding out her hand. "Thanks," Jack murmured, picking himself up. "Name's Jack."

"Serena."

"And I'm Ana," the purple-haired Genie interjected eagerly, although she received a glare from both individuals. "Never mind."

"I'm guessing you all want to take me back to your world or whatever," Jack assumed.

"Only for a temporary amount of time," Serena answered. "You

clearly had no ill intentions, other than perhaps making a quick buck. Help us find the crystals and that should eliminate any need to report you to higher ups."

"How did that first crystal even get here?" Jack asked.

"I'm not sure," Serena admitted. "That will need to be investigated later on."

"My fault, sorry," Ana said sheepishly. "I thought it was just a nifty piece of jewelry at the time. I used it for a date."

"Ana!" Serena barked while Jack merely groaned.

"I said I was sorry! And maybe we can get Karnov and Aaron to help us," Ana suggested.

"Who are they?" Jack questioned.

"Our husbands," Serena explained. "And I wouldn't recommend it if dark magic is involved." She turned back to Jack. "I'm really sorry about Ana here. Can I make it up to you? Perhaps a nice dinner between our two families once all of this is over? My treat, of course."

"Alright," Jack replied. "How does this dark magic work exactly? Can it affect anyone?"

"We don't know enough about it to really say," Serena explained. "We're still studying it back home. All we know is that Genies seem to be unaffected."

"I guess it's a good thing I never let Mimic touch the crystals," Jack murmured. "But I gave one of those things to my wife as a gift yesterday."

"That's not good," Ana commented.

"It's possible she hasn't been exposed long enough to feel the effects," Serena suggested. "Let's get it away from her before that."

"Good idea," Jack agreed.

“Jack, where have you been?” Iris asked from the inside of their small house. “And who are these people?”

“Some new… friends of mine,” Jack murmured. “Remember that crystal I gave you?”

“Yes?”

“You know anything about dark magic?” Jack asked.

“Not really, no,” Iris replied.

“Can we just cut to the chase?” Ana asked.

“Do you have to be *so* impatient?!” Serena snapped, surprising both Jack and Ana with her sudden whiplash of tone. She sighed, turning back to Iris. “Forgive my associate here. We hail from the Genie Realm, if you’re familiar with the concept.”

“Oh,” Iris said in astonishment. “I didn’t realize Jack had *those* kinds of friends.”

“We need that crystal Jack gave you,” Serena explained. “We’ve been collecting the ones he sold to people. We’re afraid it may have a corrupting influence on whoever touches it.”

“Just from a single touch?” Iris asked worriedly.

“We’re not sure yet,” Serena explained. “We’re keeping tabs on the people Jack has sold to. Have you been feeling any adverse effects lately?”

“No,” Iris answered.

“We noticed that Jack has been exceedingly skinny for a man of his age,” Serena stated.

“Is that true, Jack?” Iris asked. Jack nodded hesitantly. “Is there any way to fix this?”

“We’re looking into that,” Serena answered. “That’s why we ask for Jack to come to the Genie Realm for a short while. We have a healer named Aja who might be able to fix things up.”

“How long will it take?”

“Maybe half an hour?” Serena guessed. “If it’s any consolation, I planned out a nice dinner for our two families afterward. My husband’s a great cook.”

“Well, if you’re offering,” Iris said with a grin. The lobster woman walked over to her husband and pecked him on the cheek. “You’d better come home, Jack. I don’t want little Nora to get worried about her papa.”

Jack chuckled. “I will. I promise.”

“Yay! Mommy’s home!” a young Harmony exclaimed, jumping up and down excitedly. “Did you finally get a break from work?”

“Something like that,” Serena said with a weary smile, bending down to hug her daughter.

“This is a nice place,” Iris commented about the cottage while she held an even younger Nora in her arms. “I’m guessing you got things fixed?” she asked her husband.

“Yeah, I’m feeling a bit heavier,” Jack answered.

“You’ll feel even heavier after eating,” Aaron joked from the kitchen.

“Don’t forget to add the spices,” Cherami added, sitting down at the kitchen table.

“I never forget, Ma,” Aaron pointed out.

“Hello, Mr. Jack!” Harmony exclaimed, holding out her hand. Jack bent down, reaching out to shake her hand.

“Hello there,” Jack greeted cheerfully. “And who might you be?”

“I’m Harmony!” the young redhead answered proudly. “That’s H-a-r-m-o-n-y.”

“Heh, what I’d give to be young again,” Jack laughed.

“What’s wrong with being old?” Harmony asked. “I can’t wait to grow up. I’ll be all cool and strong just like Mommy and Daddy!”

“Maybe you should listen to her, Jack,” Iris joked. “Age with grace, as they say.”

After dinner had passed, Aaron pulled out a deck of cards, which young Harmony began dividing up among the guests at the table. “What’s this?” Jack asked.

“My favorite game!” Harmony stated. “Go Fish! Will you play with me?”

“Sure, kid,” Jack said, smiling. “Just don’t cry when I win.”

“I never cry,” Harmony pouted.

“It’s true, she really doesn’t,” Aaron laughed. “She gets it from me.”

As everyone played the game, Jack noticed Aaron’s eyes shifting back and forth suddenly. “Are you staring at my cards?” Jack asked.

“No, maybe,” Aaron chuckled. “Not like you got anything good anyway.”

“He really doesn’t,” Harmony agreed.

“Aaron…” Serena groaned. “What happened to good sportsmanship? It’s just a game, you know.”

“Maybe, but winning is still winning,” Aaron replied.

“He’s gotcha there, Mom,” Harmony interjected.

Jack merely laughed as he continued to play the card game.

“Was the thing about the card game really necessary?” Risky asked.

I was feeling nostalgic, Jack replied. *Harmony, do you remember any of what I showed you at all?*

“Vaguely,” Harmony admitted, although the more she remembered, the less she wanted to. Nothing seemed trustworthy about Jack anymore, even if he spoke the truth.

“I’m still waiting to hear why you abandoned Harmony in a dream world,” Cherami said angrily.

Jack sighed. *We’ll get there.*

“I never realized Iris was your wife,” Shantae murmured. “She’s been looking for you.”

I have no doubt, Jack agreed.

“Hold up, what?” Rotty interjected.

“We’ll tell you later,” Harmony assured her.

As it had later turned out, Aja could not fix the curse of the dark magic. At least, not permanently, Jack continued. *She could only push back the curse’s damage rather than cure it.*

“I’m guessing you want to talk about how you and I met next, right?” Risky assumed.

Correct, Jack agreed. *If you all need time to process this information, be my guest. I have… plenty of time to spare. I’m not exactly going anywhere anytime soon.*

Harmony shook her head. “No. Let’s hear it now.”

Very well…

Chapter 23

Chapter 23

Some of what I'm telling you comes from what Risky told me. So feel free to correct me if any details seem inaccurate…

A young woman with tan skin and brown hair was digging around in the desert, finding a purple crystal in the sand. She snickered, placing the crystal in her pocket.

"You shouldn't have done that."

Risky, the young woman, spun around to see a woman in a teal dress standing before her. "Who are you?" Risky asked.

"Aja," the woman replied. "And touching that crystal was not a good idea."

"Why?"

"I'll explain later," Aja replied, snapping her fingers. A portal next to her opened as she grabbed Risky by the wrist.

"Let go of me," Risky snapped, attempting to kick Aja, only to receive a punch to the face that rendered her unconscious. When she awoke, she found herself in a prison cell lined with bars of electricity. "Where am I?"

"Just woke up, huh?" a raspy voice called out to her. She looked to her right and jumped back when she saw what the voice looked like. From another cell next to her sat a bored skeleton scratching his bony chin. All that he wore was a large, purple pirate hat on his head.

"What the?" Risky shouted before she noticed something off about her own appearance. Her fingernails had turned black and her skin

had lost its tan, instead taking on a purple hue. “What’s wrong with my body?” she questioned.

“If you’re lucky, that’s the least of your concerns,” the skeleton replied.

“Ah, P.M. Good to see you haven’t lost your sense of wit,” a third voice spoke from outside the electric bars.

“Very funny,” the skeleton said sarcastically, watching a bipedal crocodile in a black suit walk up to them.

“I try,” the crocodile said with a chuckle.

“What is going on here?” Risky asked.

“Glad you asked,” the crocodile replied. “I am Ignatius. Most people just call me Techno Baron though.”

“Iggy here is the only person immune to the crystal’s power,” the skeleton explained.

“Correct,” Ignatius explained. “As such, the Genies are rather fascinated with my existence. And they’ve put me in charge of well… studying you all. And finding a cure for these conditions.”

“How long have I been here?” Risky asked.

“A couple days,” Igantius replied. “I must say… Risky, was it? You’re a fascinating case. You’ve been infused with the dark magic, but only your appearance has changed thus far. Have you been feeling any changes in your thinking or behavior lately?”

“No,” Risky answered.

“P.M. here, his behavior has changed a bit since he’s gotten here,” Igantius explained. “His rage is rather inconsistent, appearing at rather sporadic moments.”

“Well, when you haven’t seen your wife or kid in almost a year, that will make you a bit angry,” the skeleton replied, resentment growing in his voice. He stood up “And if I don’t see them soon, I promise

you, you won't see *anything* ever again."

"It's not up to me," Ignatius stated. "I'm here to help, nothing more. And by help, I mean in a realistic manner. Freeing you all wouldn't help society, now would it?"

"How many people are here?" Risky questioned.

"Oh, a couple hundred, I'd say," Ignatius guessed, making Risky's eyes widen in terror. "We're still figuring out how the crystals work. So far, touching it usually leads to infection. But there are some exceptions."

"So, we're basically prisoners until you can find a cure?"

"More or less," Ignatius said with a shrug. "On the bright side, this disease doesn't seem to be contagious, so that should help in stopping the spread." The crocodile man looked at his watch and began walking out of the room. "Time for a lunch break," he said before he shut the door behind him.

Risky let out a sigh before she turned towards the skeleton man. "Are we allowed any visitors?" she asked.

"Not any from Earth," the skeleton replied. "I haven't seen anybody yet."

"That's just great," Risky grumbled. "Why was he calling you P.M.?"

"That's Iggy's little nickname for me," the skeleton explained. "We had some guys who got infected mutate. They like to tinker like they're working on a pirate ship, at least, that's what he thought. And their arms look like a bat's arms, so he calls them Tinkerbats. They follow him around from time to time. They're the only prisoners allowed out of their cells. Iggy thought it'd be funny if they had a captain, so he put this pirate hat on me and started calling me 'The Pirate Master.'"

"Do they listen to you at all?" Risky questioned.

"They get me snacks from time to time, like apples," the skeleton answered. "Doesn't really help my hunger given… you know, but I

like the taste."

"I'm guessing the crystal did that to you," Risky assumed.

"Bingo." The door to the prison room opened, and in came a redheaded woman. "Serena?"

"Thank heavens I found you," Serena murmured, approaching the skeleton. "I've been searching for you for months. Uh… what's with the hat?"

"Long story," the skeleton replied. "I don't suppose you have any authority to let me go, do you?"

"I don't think I can," Serena said. "Not without convincing the higher ups you're not a concern. And even then, they may still want to study you."

The skeleton sighed. "A bunch of control freaks. We're not even a danger to anybody," he groaned. "How's Iris doing?"

"She's okay," Serena replied. "I managed to convince Ana not to turn her in."

"Good," the skeleton sighed. "Do you have any idea why they're doing this?"

"Supposedly for the safety of the Earth. We don't think it's contagious, so there's a chance you can go home soon."

"I've been here for a year," the skeleton griped. "That's time with my daughter I can't get back. I've been unable to talk with them whatsoever. And they consider this hospitality?!" The skeleton's voice was growing in volume, becoming more and more angry with each passing second. "And how come you weren't able to find me sooner?!"

Serena took a step back, feeling fear for the first time since she had fought the worm monster back on Earth. "I tried, but this dimension is bigger than your planet. You're being held underground. It took me months to figure out that you were even being held underground. I'm sorry," she said, a single tear dripping down her face. "If I knew

this is what they were doing, I would've done something sooner."

"A lot of care for somebody you barely know," Risky snarked from her cell.

Serena looked over to the young woman. "I may not know him very well, but I know he's a good man. He has a family like I do and he just wants to see them happy." She turned back to the skeleton man. "I may not have the authority to bust you out, but I'm going to do what I can to break you free." She gripped the electric bars, burning her hands.

"You sure that's a good idea?" the skeleton asked.

"I can do it," she insisted. She continued pulling, finally tearing the bars apart. An opening was created, allowing the skeleton man to escape through.

"Thank you," the skeleton murmured. "Are you okay?"

"Give it some time," Serena whimpered, blowing on her fried hands. "I originally thought you all were given a home away from home. Not this."

"Hey, what about me?" Risky called out.

"We'll find a way to free you, I promise," the skeleton assured her. "Are there any security cameras?"

"Undoubtedly," Serena replied. "We need to get out of here. Aaron's waiting outside."

"He's here too?" the skeleton questioned.

"Yeah. I couldn't convince him to stay home."

"Is Harmony okay?" the skeleton asked.

"Yeah, she's with Cherami," Serena explained.

"Good." The duo walked out of the prison room and noticed an unconscious Ignatius crumpled on the ground right outside the door.

“He wouldn’t really shut up,” Aaron explained, holding his hammer over his shoulders. “You doing okay, Jack?”

“Could be better,” the skeleton replied. “Any idea what the game plan is?”

“Well, not really,” Aaron laughed.

“Destroy the security cameras,” Serena explained. “Aja’s watching over them.”

“Who’s Aja?” the skeleton questioned.

“Old friend to Ana,” Serena answered.

“That’s reassuring.”

“Jack, I’m sorry they did this to you, to all of you,” Serena apologized. “The lack of communication with your family is unacceptable.”

“Let’s just get out of here,” Jack suggested. “Freeing everyone can come after we destroy those video cameras.”

“Hey, how come Aja hasn’t sounded the alarm yet?” Aaron asked.

“She’s probably still sleeping,” Serena presumed. “She’s in the room across from here.” The trio quietly approached the door to said room and gently opened the door. There sat Aja in a chair, quietly snoozing. Jack dashed at her, having his bony claws grab her by the face. He slammed her into the ground, smashing the chair beneath her to pieces. A magical aura circled around Aja’s unconscious body, slowly covering Jack’s body before completely leaving Aja’s body. *What is this?* he wondered. He could feel her essence inside his body, almost as if he had taken her power. He grinned. The sensation felt good. He grabbed Aja again and repeatedly slammed her head into the ground. Blood was dripping from Aja’s skull, something Serena had rarely seen, especially in the Genie Realm. *One more should do it.*

“Jack, stop!” Serena shouted, making her friend come to a halt. The near killer looked at his work in horror, noticing the blood covering

his claws. “You almost killed her. What’s gotten into you?!”

“I-I don’t know,” Jack murmured. If he was being honest with himself, he wasn’t sure he could’ve stopped himself if not for the intervention. *Why did I do that?* he wondered. *Well… it’s better than she deserves. She got lucky.*

“Don’t do that again,” Serena warned her friend. “I don’t want you to become any worse than the Genies are.”

She deserved it! Watching us like caged animals, doing nothing to help us! Jack wanted to scream, but bit his tongue. “I won’t,” he said instead. *Guess I'll have to pull my punches.*

“I never realized you were that strong,” Aaron murmured about Jack. “I’m surprised you couldn’t escape by yourself with that kind of power.”

“The bars are held together by light magic,” Serena interjected. “Only another Genie could break through it.” The redhead turned back to Jack. “Jack, what did you do to her? It looked like you stole her magic.”

“I’m not sure,” Jack admitted. “It must be from the crystal’s infection. I feel like I can heal people though?”

Serena answered, “I don’t know to what extent you can. It hasn’t been enough to cure the crystal infections.”

“Hm… that could still be useful.” Jack noticed a lever next to the security cameras. *Is that a release button?* he wondered. Before that, he slashed the cameras to pieces, leaving no trace of their existence whatsoever. “You know, before this, Iggy took to calling me the Pirate Master. Before, I hated it because it seemed like a stupid name. But now, I think… it’s growing on me.”

“I see…” Serena murmured, slightly concerned.

Jack yanked on the lever, hearing an alarm sound. “And that’s our cue to leave. Was there any other security besides Aja?”

“There will be when they see a prison escape,” Aaron assumed.

“I’m going to have a chat with the prisoners,” Jack stated, heading back into the room with the prisoner cells. Serena and Aaron kept guard of the door, making sure to watch out for security threats. “Everyone, this is our chance!” Jack exclaimed, gathering the attention of the prisoners. “I don’t know how many of you are good people. But know this. Protect me and you will have your freedom back. The other Genies think you’re lab experiments to be tested on. They’re just control freaks, nothing more.”

“What do you plan on doing?’ Risky asked, exiting her cell.

“With my power, I can take away their abilities and render them as powerless as we all were. When they learn of this, they’re going to be sending their best. I can’t do this alone. When they’re rendered powerless, we’ll finally be free. We’ll be able to rest easy without a looming threat over our heads. So, who’s with me?!”

The Tinkerbats jumped up and down, making clacking sounds that Jack could only assume was a sign of approval. The rest of the former prisoners cheered, raising their fists in the air. Risky took a step forward and grinned, crossing her arms. “Count me in.”

Serena listened on with concern, growing worried over the thought of the outcome behind her friend’s plan.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24

“You joined him rather easily,” Shantae said to Risky.

“I was the same age you are now,” Risky scoffed. “Give me a break.”

“What happened to Aja?” Harmony asked.

The wounds I inflicted later turned out to be fatal, Jack answered, making the two half-Genies in the room shudder.

That was somebody’s mom you killed, Shantae wanted to say. On the one hand, Aja wasn’t a particularly good mother, but she didn’t deserve to be murdered. Shantae’s hands balled into fists as tears began dripping down her cheeks. *He killed Mom too. I know she was the cause of all this, but still... I wish I could've gotten to know her.*

Rotty took notice of this and attempted to comfort her friend, placing her own hand over Shantae’s.

“Wait, so did you kill all the Genies?” Cherami interjected. “We haven’t heard from any of them in years.”

Jack let out a sigh. *I gave all who opposed me an ultimatum. Let us return home and find our families, or to become powerless like we all had been. Some of the Genies refused to fight, so we let them go. But others like Ana chose to fight. They either lost their powers or faced a worse fate.*

“You killed her, didn’t you?” Shantae murmured.

The room became silent for a moment before Jack gave his answer. *Yes. My rage had consumed me and left me with no choice. I’m… sorry.*

Shantae began balling her eyes out. “We always have a choice. I don’t care if that crystal corrupted you. You deserve what you got. I hope you burn for what you did to me. To everyone,” she growled.

“What happened to my parents?” Harmony asked. “You told me you killed them too. But I can’t see you doing that unless it was by accident. Unless the crystal corrupted you worse than I thought…”

I suppose I should tell the rest of my story then…

Jack busted through a stone wall, sending pieces of rock flying across the area. “This way!” he shouted. His army charged after him, as Serena and Aaron followed cautiously. “To the garden!” Jack and his army had been searching for weeks to find the source of their troubles, and after having interrogated enough Genies, they found the secret home of the one in charge of all Genies. Breaking down the gates to the garden, they found a woman tending to her plants. This woman had emerald hair kept back in a ponytail and wore a white dress with matching heels.

“Queen Esmeralda,” Serena addressed her as the woman stood up.

“Serena? What’s going on here?” Esmeralda questioned. “Who are all these people?”

“They’re your prisoners,” Serena answered, crossing her arms.

“Prisoners?” Esmeralda repeated in confusion.

“Don’t play dumb with us,” Jack growled.

“I’m not,” Esmeralda insisted. “I genuinely do not know what you’re talking about.”

“The ones who touched the dark magic crystals,” Serena informed her.

“Oh, that,” Esmeralda murmured. “But I don’t understand. The care we’ve given you couldn’t have been that bad. And why are you all out, anyway? You could all be contagious,” the queen spoke.

“Contagious?” Jack questioned. “ *Contagious?* One of your own idiots doesn’t even think it’s contagious.”

The queen groaned. “You can never be too careful,” she stated. “I don’t know what kind of treatment Ignatius gave you, but it clearly wasn’t sufficient. The point was to give you a home away from home while we tried to find a cure.”

“We were trapped in prison cells!” Jack screamed. “You didn’t let us hear from any of our families!”

“In my defense, Ignatius was supposed to be in charge of all that. I told him to give you the best care possible.”

“Liar!” Jack screamed. “I’ve taken the powers of dozens of Genies,” he explained, lighting his hand on fire painlessly. “Now let’s see how much you like being powerless. Just like we were.”

“Stop!” The Pirate Master blinked in disbelief, seeing Serena standing before him. He unlit the flame on his hand. “I think she does care,” Serena interjected. “Look at how she’s responding to you. That’s not a cold-hearted person. That’s somebody who made the mistake of giving power to the wrong person.”

“Serena, what are you talking about?” Jack growled, shaking his head. “Isn’t it obvious? She’s trying to trick us!”

“I don’t think she is,” Aaron jumped in. “I think Serena’s got a point.”

“No, it can’t be that simple!” Jack shouted, slapping Aaron across the face and sending him flying. A vicious crack sound could be heard in the air before Aaron slammed into the ground.

“Aaron!” Serena shouted, running up to her husband. She cradled him in her arms, trying to wake him. “Aaron! Please! Don’t do this to me!” She turned back to face the skeleton. “What are you waiting for? Use Aja’s power to heal him!” she cried out.

Jack’s army stood back in silence, everyone terrified by the Pirate Master’s deed.

“What are you all gawking at?” The Pirate Master snapped, ignoring

Serena in favor of his army. “You’re not thinking about betraying me, are you?” he growled.

“Betray?” Serena cried out. “Just please help him! Aja can’t resurrect people! Only heal! Hurry, before it’s too late!”

“Will you be quiet?!” the Pirate Master screeched, slashing at Serena’s neck. With one fell swoop, blood gushed from her wound, making her collapse instantly.

“Serena!” Esmeralda shouted.

The Pirate Master stopped in his tracks, watching the life in Serena’s eyes fade away. Soon, neither Aaron nor Serena were moving. He continued to look over the corpses, unsure how to react. *What have I done?* He picked up their bodies and had wanted to cry so much, but no tears could be shed from his bony physique.

Several Genies ran into the garden, surrounding the Pirate Master and his army. “Stay right there!” one of them called out. The Pirate Master bent his knees and leapt out of the garden with ease, all the while keeping hold of Aaron and Serena in his arms.

The Pirate Master stood over the graves of his fallen friends. He had abandoned his army in favor of returning to Earth. He had used a portal Serena had previously told him about from before he was a skeleton. Never before he would have thought he’d give up on revenge so suddenly. The thought of the Genies made his blood boil, but what he had done did that even more so. He was still certain Esmeralda was lying, but even still, he knew that did not justify his anger towards Aaron and Serena.

“Harmony…” he breathed, remembering their child. *With all of this magic I’ve taken, I can protect her.* From that point on, the Pirate Master made his way to Harmony’s cottage. Much to his surprise, the door was unlocked. And to his horror, nobody was there. *Where is she?!*

He ran out of the cottage and searched the forest around them. He

blasted various spiders with bolts of electricity to get them out of his way. From there, he found the dungeon located within the forest. He had no idea who built it, but that wasn't important. What was important was finding Harmony. Inside the dungeon, he had shouted Harmony's name, hoping for a response.

"Hello?" a voice called out, coming out from the wall she was hiding behind. "Eeep!" the young girl shrieked. "What are you?!"

The Pirate Master sighed, blasting her with an energy beam. She fell unconscious, crumpling to the floor. *I'm going to keep you safe, Harmony. I promise. I'll give you the life you otherwise couldn't have lived.*

The Pirate Master exited the dungeon, having left Harmony in her dream cage. From there, he saw Ana standing before him. "I heard what you did," Ana growled, balling her hands into fists. "Aja, Serena, Aaron. All of them are dead because of you. I'm sorry about your imprisonment, but I can't let you walk scott free. The rest of you will be free once we know that the disease isn't contagious."

I'm so tired of that word. 'Contagious,' the Pirate Master thought angrily. *I'm not going back to that prison. Not ever again.* He dashed towards her, aiming his claws for her throat. As he did so, she threw four tablets past him. While it was too late to save herself, she managed to create an energy field around the skeleton. Her throat was torn apart like ribbons, but she used her dying wish to send the stones flying into the sky. They blasted off into four different directions as the skeleton watched in disbelief. His world was growing smaller by the second, as his vision was progressively fading. Soon, there was nothing but blackness. He couldn't hear or feel anything. No thoughts could occur whatsoever.

When his vision was restored, he heard a woman's voice. A familiar voice. "This looks pretty good on me," the voice spoke. That's when he realized who it was, and who was now wearing him as an accessory.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Harmony let out a deep sigh, tears dripping down her face like Shantae's was. Cherami wrapped her hands around her granddaughter, doing her best to comfort Harmony. "I'm so sorry, Harmony," Cherami apologized. "I remember that day now. I was getting groceries and I left you on your own. You must've found a way to get out and that's when it all happened."

The redhead slowly nodded before she gave a statement to the Pirate Master: "That crystal corrupted you worse than I thought."

Yes, Jack spoke, his tone surprisingly remorseful. *If you hate me, I completely understand.*

"I don't want to hear your voice *ever* again," she growled. The room went dead silent after this demand.

The room remained quiet for a minute until Shantae stood up. "I think I'm going to go home," the younger half-Genie spoke, wiping away her tears. "Hey, Risky. Where do you plan on living? Since you don't have a boat anymore."

"Bolo offered to let me stay at his place for a bit," Risky explained.

Shantae smiled. "Make sure Bolo gives you my phone number."

"Why can't you give it to me right now?" Risky asked.

"My phone… died," Shantae said sheepishly.

Risky sighed. "Really should remember your own phone number. Take care of yourself, okay?"

Shantae nodded. "I will." The purple-haired half-Genie walked over

to Harmony. “Hey, Harmony. If you ever need somebody to talk to about… all of this, just let me know. I can come by tomorrow if you’d like.”

“Sure,” Harmony replied with a weak smile.

“Come on, Rotty,” Shantae told her friend. “Let’s get going.” As they shut the door behind them, Shantae gasped.

“Shantae! Are you okay?” Rotty asked, approaching her friend.

“I forgot about Vera and her family!” Shantae explained.

“Oh, don’t worry. I got Agnes’s phone number,” Rotty said, pulling out her phone. A big goofy grin appeared on Rotty’s lips. “And it’s dead…”

“Guess we both forgot to charge our phones,” Shantae observed with a small shuckle.

“Great minds think alike,” Rotty joked, making Shantae laugh. The young half-Genie’s laughter quickly turned to a depressive sigh. “You gonna be okay?” Rotty asked. “All of that must’ve been a lot to take in.”

“I’m not sure,” Shantae admitted. “I really don’t want to think about it. And I don’t know how I’m even going to explain this to Vera.”

“Maybe don’t,” Rotty suggested. “She’s already got enough on her plate to think about. Let’s not add to it.”

“Yeah,” Shantae agreed. “At least, for now.”

“I guess we can call her tomorrow,” Rotty suggested. “It’s pretty late.”

“Yeah, I should be getting home,” Shantae replied, yawning. “Your brothers are probably worried sick about you.”

“Abner probably is,” Rotty agreed. “Poe, he’ll convince Ab to cool down and give it a while. This isn’t the first time I’ve been away for a couple days.”

“Oh, um… ok,” Shantae murmured. She stared up at the night sky and admired the stars. “They’re so pretty.”

“Yeah, they are,” Rotty said with a smile.

“Hey, Rotty?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for being you know… sensitive to my uh… needs.”

“What do you mean?” Rotty asked.

“Speaking louder so I can hear you. Staying on the side where I can actually hear things. It means a lot,” Shantae explained. “It makes me feel normal again.”

“No problem,” Rotty replied, patting her on the back.

“Let’s… just pretend everything *is* normal, okay?” Shantae asked.

Rotty nodded. “Sure. Hmm... normal stuff. You like any sports?”

“I like soccer,” Shantae answered with a grin.

“Me too,” Rotty said with a small chuckle. “I make a terrible goalie, though. The ball will sometimes hit my face and knock it off, making both go into the net.” Shantae held back her own chuckles, trying desperately not to laugh. “It’s okay to laugh,” Rotty assured her. “I don’t feel pain.”

“I know, but I *feel* bad for laughing,” Shantae joked. “You poor thing.”

“It’s fine,” Rotty insisted. “Anyway, I got an idea for you. It might improve your public image a bit.”

“What’s that?” Shantae asked.

“A catchphrase!” Rotty exclaimed.

“I technically have one, but it’s pretty lame,” Shantae replied.

“What is it?”

“‘I’m Ret-2-Go,’” Shantae quoted herself. “Came up with it as a kid. “Short for ‘I’m Ready to Go.’”

“I think it works,” Rotty replied. “It’s really cute.”

“Sky thinks it’s kinda lame,” Shantae said sheepishly.

“Well, I think it’s cool,” Rotty replied. “Not everyone thinks the same. Maybe the town will like it.”

“Thanks,” Shantae said, beginning to smile once more. After a while, Shantae had transformed into her bird form and carried Rotty back to the lighthouse. As they approached the house, Shantae transformed back to normal and followed Rotty inside.

“Is it okay if I spend the night?” Rotty asked.

“Sure,” Shantae replied. “I got a sleeping bag upstairs.” The duo noticed Holly sleeping in her own sleeping bag in the back hallway on the first floor. “Guess she’s resting easy,” noticing that the orange-haired woman was snoring. The duo climbed up the staircase and Rotty took quick notice of Shantae’s hammock.

“Woah. You sleep in a hammock? That rocks,” the zombie stated excitedly.

“Yeah,” Shantae replied. “Sorry if a sleeping bag doesn’t compare.”

“Nah, it’s fine,” Rotty insisted. The duo went to sleep rather quickly that night.

The next morning, Rotty rummaged around the cabinets to find some food. “Looking for something?” Shantae asked, standing behind her and rubbing a sleepy eye.

Rotty grinned. “Just some breakfast,” she explained.

“I’ve got some cinnamon rolls,” Shantae offered.

“I was more of an ice cream kind of gal,” Rotty explained.

“You can’t have ice cream for breakfast,” Shantae snorted.

“I mean, I can,” Rotty pointed out. “I don’t exactly gain or lose weight.”

“True,” Shantae conceded. “But I love me some rolls.”

“Then let’s have that,” Rotty replied. The two dined on some cinnamon rolls Shantae had kept in her pantry. When they finished eating, Rotty pulled herself closer to Shantae. “Hey, I got something I want to show you.”

“What’s that?” Shantae asked.

“Close your eyes and I’ll show you,” Rotty stated, making the half-Genie do so. Rotty quickly pecked Shantae on the cheek, making the half-Genie blush and immediately open her eyes.

“Rotty?” Shantae asked, completely surprised by the gesture. “Why did you do that?”

“I know it’s *really* sudden, but I wanted to tell you how I feel,” Rotty explained. “You’re the first person in a *long* time to make *me* feel normal. You didn’t see a monster. You just saw me. I really appreciate that. Plus…” A devilish grin appeared on the zombie’s cold lips. “...you’re pretty cute.”

“Uh… thanks,” Shantae stammered, unsure how else to respond. “But if you think I’m just gonna date somebody I just met…”

“I don’t,” Rotty admitted. “Love doesn’t work like that. I just wanted to let you know how I felt. Actions speak louder than words, right?”

“Yeah,” Shantae agreed, placing an arm on Rotty’s shoulder. “No matter what, Rotty, you’ll always be my friend.”

“That’s good enough for me,” Rotty said, grinning. “I just hope maybe someday we can be more than that.”

“Maybe,” Shantae said with a small smile.

“I should probably call my brothers,” Rotty stated. “Since my phone’s

charged, I should be *Ret-2-Go* , eh?" she joked.

Shantae chuckled. "Yeah, you would be."

"Hey, Abner," Rotty greeted her older brother over the phone. "Relax, I'm in Scuttle Town. You've been there before. It's near Water Town…" After the phone call, it would only take a few minutes before her brothers showed up in their wagon. Shantae could not see either of them through the view of the window, but she could tell they were people who cared deeply about their little sister.

"Take care, Shantae," Rotty said, opening the door. "Let's hang out again sometime soon."

"You got it," Shantae replied, shutting the door. She looked out the window and waved, watching her friend leave. *Better get ready for the day,* Shantae told herself, getting dressed in the meantime. She ran out the door and quickly stopped, remembering the bridge had yet to be fixed. *Wait, how did they get over the bridge?* she questioned. She let out a sigh. *Never mind. Well, guess I'm going to have to bring this up with the mayor…* she thought miserably. She decided to dance, turning herself into the bird form to fly over the broken bridge. *Whatever comes my way, I'm Ret-2-Go!*

Thank you for taking the time to read this. I intend to write a sort of sequel to this at some point. I hope you enjoy reading that when the time comes.

Edit 3/21/2023:

Chapter 1 of the sequel is out.

https://archiveofourown.org/works/45906964